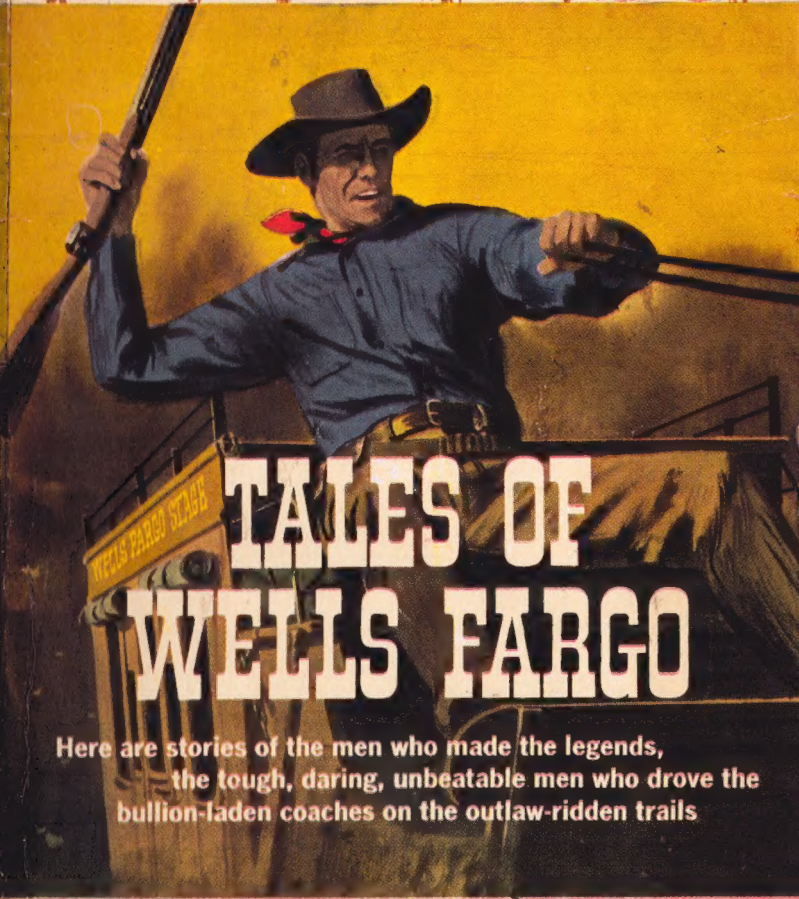




Frank Gruber



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TALES OF WELLS FARGO

by Frank Gruber



published by Bantam Books, Inc., New York

TALES OF WELLS FARGO

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All the stories in this volume are taken from original teleplays from the Television series, **TALES OF WELLS FARGO**. The narrative treatment of all stories was written by Frank Gruber. *Billy the Kid*, *Belle Starr*, *The Vigilantes* and *The Glory Hole* were adapted from Frank Gruber's own teleplays.

The original story of *Sam Bass* is by Frank Gruber, but the teleplay was written by Steve Fisher, as were also the original stories and teleplays of *John Wesley Hardin* and *The Auction*. *Doc Bell* is from an original story and teleplay by William Leicester.

Billy the Kid

THE STAGECOACH had been attacked in mid-morning. Terror had struck to the heart of Nell Forester and she had been all but paralyzed during the short, savage fight between the driver, the express guard and the ugly savages who had seemingly risen from the white sand that stretched out in all directions as far as the eye could see.

Nell Forester, inside the stage, had not seen the beginning of the fight. She'd been aware only that the driver had suddenly whipped up his horses, that she had heard weird, marrow-chilling yells and then, for a few minutes, it had been all she could do to keep from being battered inside the plunging, hurtling stagecoach. She heard the thunder of guns, some of them overhead, and then the coach piled up in a terrible crash and blackness enveloped her for a time.

When she regained consciousness, all was still. She crawled out of the overturned coach and the first thing that met her eyes was the staring-eyed, lifeless face of the stagecoach driver. The top of his head was wet, a red mess. He had been scalped.

So had the shotgun messenger. One horse lay in the sand, dead. The others had disappeared, evidently taken by the Indians.

And then—then Nell Forester knew that she was alone in the middle of a desert. As far as she could see, there was not a moving, living thing. Not even a blade of grass, for this desert was unlike any through which she had passed in the preceding days. Then there had been clumps of grass, at least. Here there was only sand; sand of a virgin whiteness.

A chill began at the base of Nell's spine, rippled up through her entire body and brought a gasp from her lips. She looked

down at the green velvet traveling dress, the high-heeled shoes that she should not have brought west with her.

She was doomed. The realization made her tremble. This was the Territory of New Mexico, in the year of Our Lord, 1880. It was the land of savages and fierce white men. She had seen both back there in that miserable collection of mud houses that they called Las Cruces.

What madness had prompted her, Nell Forester, to come out to this wilderness, this land of sand and savages, heat and desolation?

John, her brother? Yes, but why hadn't she written him that she was on her way? He could have met her. She'd known that the southwest was still untamed; she'd learned that in her boarding school. Apaches roamed at large and even in Boston you could read in the newspapers how they had ridden down upon isolated settlements and massacred white people.

Nell's eyes, roaming about the vast expanse of white sand, passed a black speck, came back to it. Was it a moving speck? Nell stared at it until the spot began to dance before her eyes. Then she closed her eyes for several moments. When she opened them again, the spot had grown larger. And it was definitely moving . . . toward her.

And now a new dread swept over her. If it was an animal she could not defend herself. She had never fired a gun in her life.

It was a horse. She could determine that now. And there was a rider on it, but whether it was an Apache or a white man she did not know.

The rider evidently had sharper eyes than she or the coach made a larger object to see, for suddenly the horse was put to a gallop.

Nell dropped to the sand. To run was useless. If it was an Indian her only chance was to pretend she was dead. The Indians had not molested her when she had been unconscious. This one might also ignore her.

She stretched out flat, her left ear to the sand, her eyes open, but slitted as they watched the approaching rider. She could hear the drumming of the horse's hoofs as it approached and then suddenly the drumming stopped.

Nell's eyes flew open, irresistibly. The rider had stopped some fifty yards away and—he was a white man!

Nell scrambled to her knees and sobbed in relief. Her move had a strange effect upon the man. His horse leaped to the side as if jabbed with a spur and the bright sun flashed on something metallic. A gun, in the man's hand.

Nell cried out: "Don't shoot!"

She lifted herself to her feet.

The rider nudged his horse with his knees and bore slowly down upon Nell. His eyes remained steadily on her and an uneasy feeling of alarm crept over Nell. He was a white man, but there was something strange about him. His tenseness, his watchfulness, as if he expected someone to spring out from the concealment of the overturned coach and fire upon him.

When his horse was no more than ten yards from Nell, he stopped, but still retained his seat in the saddle. The gun in his hand, Nell noted, was trained carelessly upon her.

"Indians," Nell said poignantly. "We were attacked by Indians . . ."

The man gave her a sharp look, then dismounted. His eyes searched the ground. He found a feather, apparently from an Indian's headdress, examined it, then tossed it aside.

"How—how far is it to Lincoln?" Nell suddenly asked.

"Lincoln?" A sharpness was in the man's tone.

"That's where I'm going. My—my brother lives there."

The man looked at her with brooding eyes. He was no more than twenty or twenty-one, but his eyes were old, bleak. There was a haunted look in them. The eyes had seen too much. He said:

"It's quite a ways to Lincoln. Sixty miles, maybe a little more."

"Sixty miles," cried Nell, in dismay. "I can't walk that far."

"It's a far piece," said the man, nodding. "Stage don't run but once a week."

"Then how'll I get to Lincoln?" She looked at him hopefully. "You—you'll take me there?"

"No, ma'am," he said, promptly. "I'm going away from Lincoln."

"But you can turn back. I—I'll pay you. That is, my brother will."

"Ma'am, your brother hasn't got enough money to pay me."

"He's an important man in Lincoln," Nell persisted. "He's just been elected county attorney. He wrote me—"

"Your brother's John Forester?" the man exclaimed.

"You know him?" Nell asked, eagerly.

He hesitated, then nodded. "I know him . . . and I'll repeat what I said. Your brother hasn't got enough money to pay me to go back to Lincoln."

"Why? What have you got against my brother?"

"I've got nothing against him," was the reply. "But my

name's Bill Bonney. . . ." He paused as Nell regarded him with a puzzled look, then added, "Billy the Kid."

Nell was still not impressed. "I'm Nell Forester."

The name had apparently not registered on Nell Forester. Billy the Kid said, "You haven't heard of me, ma'am?"

"Should I have?"

"I don't know. You said you were John Forester's sister. . . ."

"I am, but I haven't seen him in five years. Our parents died then and John came out west. I stayed in Massachusetts until—until John wrote that he was doing so well out here. Uncle Fred was having a difficult time so I thought I'd come out and stay with John awhile." She looked anxiously at Billy the Kid. "John is doing well in Lincoln?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am, he is."

"Then take me to him . . . please!"

He regarded her soberly, then turned and scanned the horizons. Finally his eyes returned to Nell. "Ma'am, you're sure you've never heard of me?"

"No, I haven't. But what difference does it make? I'm alone out here, surrounded by Indians. . . ."

He shook his head. "Wasn't Indians attacked this stage-coach." Nell started to protest, but he went on. "White men disguised as Indians. They robbed the Wells Fargo strongbox. Indians wouldn't take money." He paused. "Some of the whites around here are worse'n Indians. If they thought you were alive and could identify them. . . ."

A sob suddenly wracked Nell and she covered her face with her hands and began to cry. Billy regarded her a moment, his face clouded. If anything, the heaviness settled over his features even more. Finally, he drew a deep breath and exhaled.

"Don't cry, ma'am," he said. "I'll take you to your brother."

Lincoln was a dark town, for after nightfall no man put on a light in his house until he had closed his shutters and locked his door. As a result, the only light came from chinks in the shuttered windows and doors.

Walking stiffly, Billy the Kid led the horse on which Nell Forester rode. Nell tried to probe the darkness. "Why is the town so dark?" she asked. "You'd think someone would show a light."

They had traveled together the day before, they had camped for the night and traveled again today, from early morning, but during all those hours Billy the Kid had told her very little of himself and even less of Lincoln, the town where her brother

held public office and was an important figure, the town where Billy the Kid's name was anathema to a certain faction.

He led the horse on which she rode now, off the street, up to an adobe wall that surrounded a house.

"Here we are," he said. "Your brother's house."

Exclaiming, Nell started to dismount. Billy held out his hands to help her and she slid down into his arms. For an instant, he froze, then stepped back quickly. "Your brother," he said, hoarsely, then turning away from her, called: "Forester! John Forester!"

"Come," Nell said excitedly. She ran toward the gate, expecting him to follow. She went through the gate, toward the house.

"John!" she called. "It's me. Your sister, Nell!"

The front door was whipped open and John Forester appeared in the lighted doorway. There was a revolver in his hand.

"John!"

"Nell!" cried Forester. "Good lord!"

Then she was in his arms. Forester embraced her tightly for a moment, then pushed her back. "Here, let me look at you. How in the world did you get here?"

"Billy brought me," babbled Nell. "The—the stage was attacked. It—it was horrible, but then Billy came along—"

"Billy?" asked Forester, sharply.

Nell only now became aware that Billy had not followed her up to the house. "Billy Bonney!" she called. "Billy!"

Forester gripped his sister's arm. "You said Billy Bonney brought you? *Billy the Kid*?"

"That's right," Nell said. "He told me his nickname was Billy the Kid . . . He's gone."

A block away a gun banged. It was followed by a savage yell, then a burst of gunfire and, finally, by the galloping of a horse's hoofs.

"So he's come back," Forester said. He led his sister toward the door. "Come inside."

As sure as day followed night, so Wells Fargo followed up the robbery of its strongbox, the killing of two of its employees.

Jim Hardie, in Arizona at the time, drew the assignment. He rode to Lordsburg, to Las Cruces, then headed northward into the White Sands. By the time he reached the scene of the robbery, the two Wells Fargo men had been buried, but

otherwise the stage had been left as it was when Billy the Kid had first encountered Nell Forester here.

It didn't take Hardie long to come to the same conclusion as that of Billy the Kid—that white men, not Indians, had committed the crime. He picked up an Indian headdress and rubbed the inside of the band with a finger, then sniffed at the finger. He found a footprint and ran his finger lightly around the perimeter of it. He got down on his knees and scanned the ground closely.

He was still on his knees when the sound of horses' hoofs caused him to look up. Coming along the road from the south, were four horsemen. A civilian with a flowing beard was in the lead. Three cavalymen followed.

The civilian was a man whose picture had been in newspapers. He was General Lew Wallace, Civil War hero and newly appointed governor of the Territory of New Mexico. In a short time, his former fame would be eclipsed by the publication of possibly the greatest novel ever written in the English language, *Ben Hur*.

The quartet of horsemen pulled up near Hardie, who got to his feet. Hardie gave them a half salute.

The general nodded to Hardie. "How are you, sir? I'm General Lew Wallace, the territorial governor."

Hardie nodded. "My name is Hardie. I work for Wells Fargo and I've been sent to investigate this. . . ." He gestured toward the wreckage of the stagecoach.

The general frowned. "I was just about to come to Lincoln County, anyway, and this was the last straw. Conditions have become intolerable and I intend to do something about it." His voice rose sharply. "You know what's been going on in this territory?"

"I've heard quite a bit about it. A range war."

"It may have started out as a range war," the general said, grimly, "but it's gone far beyond that. To all intents and purposes a state of anarchy now exists. I have specific orders from the President of the United States to put an end to it. And I intend to do just that."

"You're going to declare martial law, sir?"

"I don't want to, but I will if I am compelled to do so." General Wallace gestured to the stagecoach. "The report I received on this was that it was the work of white men."

"I believe you're right, sir—white men, posing as Indians and evidence left openly that it was white men."

General Wallace showed puzzlement. "Why would they do that?"

"Somebody wanted to throw suspicion on somebody. That's what it looks like."

"Billy the Kid?"

Hardie shrugged. "He's the only official outlaw in Lincoln County that I've heard of."

"The man's a cold-blooded killer," the general exclaimed.

"Man? I should say, boy. He's only nineteen or twenty."

"They say he's killed a man for every year of his life."

"One of the first things I'm going to do," said General Wallace, grimly, "is eliminate this Billy the Kid."

On the surface Lincoln looked like a sleepy Mexican town. Most of the buildings were built of adobe, some of them old. No particular order had been observed and some of the buildings spread out into the street, causing some odd twists and turns in the street.

The big building in the town was the Murphy & Dolan store. The building would have been big even for a town three times the population of Lincoln, but then the county itself was a large one, larger in fact, than several of the New England states.

Hardie checked in at the little adobe hotel and for most of the first day he sat in the lobby, or on the veranda. He watched the residents of Lincoln. Most of them were Mexican, but there were Americans in town, too. Hard-visaged men, bristling with guns. Few of them rode singly and most of them went to the Murphy & Dolan store.

Early on the morning of his second day in Lincoln, Hardie got his horse from the livery stable across the street from the courthouse and made a circuit of the town. He studied the roads that led in and out of town, formed a mental picture in his mind of the buildings. Finally, he rode back to the courthouse and tying his horse at the rail, went in and found the county attorney's office.

John Forester was at a roll-top desk. "You're the Wells Fargo man," he said, as Hardie entered.

"That's right." He extended his hand to the county attorney.

"You came in yesterday with the governor," Forester said.

"You seem to have had a report on me."

"Just town talk." Forester shrugged. "You're investigating the stagecoach holdup?"

"Yes." Hardie paused. "Your sister was in it."

The county attorney frowned. "I hope you don't intend to question her. It was a rather grueling experience for her."

"I may have to talk to her."

"I can tell you all she knows, which is very little."

"I have the sheriff's report," Hardie said.

"Acting sheriff," corrected Forester. "Dracker. The sheriff was killed awhile ago." He paused. "By Billy the Kid."

"You're sure it was The Kid?"

"The killing was seen by a dozen people, right out on the street."

Hardie hesitated. "Mr. Forester, I'm a newcomer here. I couldn't possibly know all the ins and outs of what's been going on in Lincoln County. But I've been told that there are two factions in the county. The Murphy-Dolan crowd and the other side, Billy the Kid's."

Forester got to his feet. "Mr. Hardie," he said, warmly, "I'm going to give you some advice, good advice. Finish your business here and get out."

"Well, sir," said Hardie, "your advice may be good, but I don't rightly see how I can take it."

"Take the last part," said Forester. "Get out!"

Hardie shook his head. "A stagecoach was held up. Two employees of Wells Fargo were killed. I don't see how I can leave Lincoln County until I get the men who killed our employees."

Forester exclaimed in annoyance. "I'm as anxious to get Billy the Kid as you are!"

"Billy the Kid?"

"He's your man, isn't he?"

"I don't know," Hardie said, slowly. "Maybe he is, and maybe he isn't."

The door suddenly opened and Nell Forester came into the room. She came to an abrupt halt. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were busy. . . ."

"In a few minutes, Nell."

Hardie said: "Miss Forester!"

Nell Forester looked at Hardie, then at her brother. The county attorney performed the introductions with ill grace. "My sister, Nell, Mr. Hardie. Nell, he's a Wells Fargo detective."

"Wells Fargo," began Nell, then exclaimed, "the stagecoach people."

Hardie nodded. "If you don't mind, Miss Forester, I'd like to ask you some questions."

"I told you she's in no condition," Forester snapped.

"I am," said Nell quickly. "It's about Billy the Kid, isn't it?"

"I heard that he brought you here."

"He saved my life," said Nell, fervently. "He risked his own, coming back . . . to help me."

"Nell!" said her brother, sharply.

"Very well, I won't talk about it, if you don't want me to."

Forester groaned. "All right, so it was Billy the Kid. He had an angle, that's certain."

"Is it, Mr. Forester?" asked Hardie.

"You explain it, Mr. Hardie," Forester said, bitterly. "The worst killer this country's ever known, acting the part of Sir Galahad . . . bringing my sister to me, after he'd held up the stagecoach and killed two people."

"You're convinced it was Billy the Kid who held up the stage?"

"Who else?"

"Miss Forester," said Hardie, "you were on that stage. Did you see the men who attacked it?"

Nell turned to her brother. "What do you want me to say?"

"What do I want you to say?" cried Forester. "The truth, of course."

She nodded, soberly. "I didn't see their faces. I—I thought it was Indians. I was wounded and when I regained consciousness I saw Billy—coming toward the coach. He wasn't dressed like an Indian."

"He had time to change his clothes."

Nell shook her head. "The man who brought me to Lincoln was not one of the men who attacked the stage. He couldn't have been!"

Forester threw up his hands. "Do you see, Hardie? She knows. Intuition. But we know that Billy the Kid has killed fifteen men."

"I don't know it," said Hardie. "I've heard stories, but I happen to be a skeptic. I believe about one half of what I see . . . and about five per cent of what I hear." He bowed to Nell Forester. "Thank you, Miss Forester. Mr. Forester." He nodded again, turned and left the office.

On the street, Hardie stood and looked at the big Murphy & Dolan store, diagonally across the street. He read the big sign over it: *MURPHY & DOLAN, GENERAL MERCHANDISE. ARMY CONTRACTORS.* He shook his head and stepped out to the hitchrail. He was about to mount, when he saw a folded slip of paper stuck in the saddle.

He slipped it out and unfolded the paper. On it was scrawled in very bad handwriting:

"Billy at La Luz."

The note was unsigned. Hardie rolled the little piece of paper into a tiny ball and dropped it into his shirt pocket. He was about to mount his horse, then thinking better of it, started across the street, leading the animal.

Four horses were tied to the hitchrail. A heavyset, beetle-browed man stood near the door, blocking entry. Hardie started to step around him, but the man moved slightly and again blocked him.

"Excuse me," Hardie said.

"What for?" grinned the ruffian.

It was obvious to Hardie that the man was spoiling for a fight. To save time and trouble, Hardie brought up his fist in a tremendous blow and smashed the man on the jaw. He reeled aside, turned around completely and pitched to the ground.

Hardie walked into the store.

The store was a big one, carrying everything from groceries to women's clothing and everything needed for the ranch or farm. A lean, swarthy man, wearing a star, was near the front of the store. Another man was nearby and behind the counter, Murphy, a scowling, heavyset man, turned from the window, as Hardie entered.

"You go around beating up people?" he asked Hardie.

"He wanted a fight," said Hardie. "I beat him to the punch."

The man with the badge glowered at Hardie. "Mr. Wells Fargo, you got no authority here."

"You seem to have some," retorted Hardie, "then how come you let fellows like your friend out there pick on people?"

"Clem Bollinger's one of my deputies. He's got a right to question strangers."

"I don't seem to be a stranger. You and everybody knows who I am."

"Was me sent the report to your company," Acting Sheriff Dracker said. He smiled thinly. "What's the matter with you? You been here two days and you ain't caught The Kid yet?"

"The Kid?"

"That's who you're lookin' for, ain't it?"

"I'm looking for the men who robbed the stage and killed two of our boys."

"Same thing," said Dracker. "The Kid and a couple of his boys."

The door was slammed open and Bollinger, the deputy, charged in, gun in his fist. Hardie stepped to one side, his hand dropping to his side, ready to make a swift draw.

"I don't want any trouble, Sheriff," he said, quickly.

Dracker threw up a detaining hand. "Hold it, Clem!"

"Some Mex stuck a note in his saddle," snarled Bollinger. "He found it just before he come across."

Dracker's eyes narrowed. He turned to Hardie, held out his hand. "Let's see it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," retorted Hardie.

"I seen him," cried Bollinger. "It was one of The Kid's Mex friends. I was gonna go over when he came out and started over here."

The storekeeper said, "Mister, you didn't waste time getting lined up. You're a friend of The Kid's, you got no business in here. . . ."

"I've never laid eyes on The Kid," said Hardie.

Dracker made an impatient gesture. "Let's stop horsing around. That note—"

"He stuck it in his shirt pocket," snapped Bollinger.

Dracker took a step toward Hardie. Hardie's hand came up with his Frontier Model in it. Bollinger, still holding his gun, started forward, but Dracker cried out in panic.

"Clem . . . don't!"

Bollinger was anxious to gun Hardie, but he saw however that Hardie's first bullet would get the acting sheriff.

Hardie began to move sideways to the door. "I'm going out," he said, "and if anyone comes out within thirty seconds, he's a dead man!"

Dracker said, sullenly: "Nobody's coming after you. Not now. But you sure picked the wrong side!"

Hardie went through the door, ran to his horse and mounted. He half expected that Dracker's men would pour out of the store and start shooting, but they apparently thought discretion the better part of valor.

Hardie turned his horse away from the hitchrail and rode to the hotel, where a cavalryman stood at attention, just outside the door.

The soldier started to block Hardie's entry, but General Lew Wallace, seated in an armchair in the lobby, looked through the open door and called out: "It's all right, Sentry."

Hardie went into the hotel.

The general nodded to him. "I was just going to send for you." He looked inquiringly at the county attorney who stood nearby. "Proceed, Prosecutor."

"I've been here too long, Governor," Forester said. "It is possible that I have become biased." He hesitated, then added, grudgingly, "Without realizing it." He paused again. "My sister gives me an entirely different picture of Billy the Kid, of his character. . . ."

The general regarded Forester thoughtfully a moment, then swung to Hardie. "And you, Mr. Hardie? Have you come to any conclusions?"

Hardie shook his head. "No, but I've met Mr. Murphy and some of his friends—including Sheriff Dracker."

"Acting sheriff," corrected Forester.

The general came to a sudden conclusion. "I've talked to your acting sheriff, Prosecutor, and he's the main reason I think I should have a talk with Billy the Kid before taking drastic measures. Perhaps the guilt isn't all on one side."

"A week or two ago I would have protested your remark," Forester said heavily.

"But you're not so sure now?"

"I'm willing to re-examine my position."

Hardie, sensing the shift in the opinions of the two men, said, "Governor, would you talk to Billy the Kid if he came here?"

"I'd talk to the devil himself," snapped the general, "if I thought it would do some good."

"Would you give The Kid a safe conduct promise?"

The general's eyes glowered. He leaned forward. "What do you think the people would say if they heard that a general of the army and the governor of a territory was willing to deal with a proscribed outlaw and killer?"

"I imagine the newspapers would give you a rather difficult time of it," said Hardie.

The governor turned back to Forester. "Prosecutor?"

"I cannot answer you, sir," said Forester. "A week ago. . . ."

The general made a gesture of dismissal. "I know, your sister." He switched back to Hardie. "You've gone this far, now, tell me, how would I go about getting a message to this outlaw?"

"I'll take it to him."

"You know where he is?"

Forester exclaimed: "Mr. Hardie, if you have information it is my duty—"

"You won't get it from me," Hardie said, quickly. "Murphy and his sheriff tried that a little while ago."

"Let's not start wrangling again," the general cried. "Very well, Hardie, find this man, bring him here. I promise him safe passage. I'll even put it in writing!"

La Luz consisted of no more than a dozen adobe hovels, scattered over a two-acre area. One of the hovels was somewhat larger than the others and when Hardie dismounted in front of it, he saw that it was a store, although there was no identifying sign outside.

A Mexican, wrapped in a serape, was crouched beside the door of the store. Hardie stepped up to him. "Amigo, I seek a man, Billy. . . ."

The Mexican got to his feet, gave Hardie a vacant smile and walked off. Hardie shook his head and entered the store.

The interior of the store was no better than the outside. The merchandise on the shelves was meager. A Mexican, a serape draped over one shoulder, came out of a room at the rear.

"Buenos dias, señor," said Hardie.

"Buenos dias, señor," replied the storekeeper. "You wish to purchase something from my humble store?"

"No, señor," said Hardie, "but I believe a friend of yours would like to talk to me. Would you tell him that the man from Wells Fargo is here?"

"No comprendo, señor," shrugged the Mexican.

"Billy the Kid, señor."

The man shook his head violently. "I do not know of whom you are speaking, señor."

Hardie stepped to a sack of chili beans and seated himself on it. The Mexican waited a moment, then seeing that Hardie was determined to remain, he shuffled out of the store, to his living quarters at the rear.

Hardie smiled.

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later that a foot slithered on hard packed earth. There was silence for a long moment, during which time Hardie did not turn.

The voice of Billy the Kid then demanded: "You looking for someone?"

"I got your message," said Hardie, still without turning.

"Message?"

Carefully, Hardie reached into his shirt pocket and took out the scrap of paper that had been attached to his saddle in Lincoln. It had been smoothed out and folded. He held it up.

"I sent you no message," The Kid said, firmly.

"Well, perhaps you didn't. I thought you might want to ask some questions . . . about Nell Forester. . . ."

The Kid was silent for a moment, then moved forward, into view. "Keep talking," he said.

"General Lew Wallace, the territorial governor, wants to have a talk with you."

"Don't give me that," said Billy scornfully.

"I'm going to reach inside my coat," said Hardie, "for a letter." He reached slowly under his coat, brought out his hand as slowly. He extended the governor's letter to Billy the Kid.

The outlaw opened it, glanced briefly at the contents. "This don't mean a thing."

"I think it does," said Hardie. "General Wallace is a hero of the Civil War, a personal friend of the President. He wants to settle the trouble in Lincoln County."

"Has he arrested Murphy and Dolan?" Billy cried. "Has he thrown Dracker, Bollinger and Evans into jail?"

"No, he hasn't," said Hardie.

"When he does those things," The Kid said, bitterly, "I'll come in myself—without any promise of immunity."

"Billy," said Hardie, earnestly, "you sent for me. Why?"

"I'm not saying I sent for you," The Kid said, "but suppose I had sent for you. You're an outsider; I might have figured you wouldn't be prejudiced and I might have had another idea. . . ."

"Like Nell Forester?"

"I don't know any Nell Forester," The Kid said savagely.

Hardie regarded The Kid thoughtfully, as the latter seemed to withdraw into a mental shell. Then Hardie said, quietly: "She's defending you, Billy. She's softened her brother to the point of yielding to the governor, asking you to come in."

"It's too late!" The Kid burst out, poignantly. "Too late by two or three years. There's been too much fighting, too much blood . . ."

"Try it, Billy," Hardie said earnestly. "I think the governor's an honest man—and impartial. I think he's going to make a genuine effort to straighten things out."

"Fat chance of that!" cried The Kid. "Can he bring back Tunstall, the only man who ever befriended me? Or McSween? Or any of the others?" He paused, then added, bitterly, "Or some of the people we killed?"

"Nobody can do that, Billy. But you're still alive. You came

back to Lincoln County after you'd left. Nell Forester said that herself."

"Billy was quiet for a long moment, then he said: "How is she?"

Four horses were tied to the rail outside the Murphy & Dolan store, but their owners were not in sight as Billy the Kid rode past with Jim Hardie. The Kid carried a rifle across the pommel of his saddle and his restless eyes searched the street on both sides.

His pale blue eyes took in the two riflemen a few yards farther along, one on each side of the street, then sought out the two blue-clad soldiers in front of the hotel.

Neither he nor Hardie spoke as they rode up to the hotel and dismounted.

They tied their mounts to the hitchrail and climbed the stairs to the veranda. General Wallace rose from a chair.

"Mr. Bonney," he said. He did not extend his hand and The Kid made no move to do so. He nodded stiffly in acknowledgment to the general's greeting.

John Forester, standing near the wall of the hotel, said, gruffly, "Billy."

Billy nodded to the county attorney, then turned to the general. "General Wallace, I read your novel, *The Fair God*."

General Wallace looked sharply at The Kid. "What?"

"I can read," The Kid said, quickly. Then he added, stiffly: "I didn't just dig that up just to flatter you. I happen to like Mexicans, their history. . . ."

"Of course," said the general gruffly. "I've heard that." He relaxed. "I'm writing a new novel. A story of Christ . . . Ben Hur, I'm calling it. . . ." Then he became brusque. "I didn't send for you to discuss my literary efforts." He indicated a chair. "Sit down, Bonney."

Billy made a small gesture to indicate that he preferred to stand. The general, nettled, seated himself. "I'm not going to open with recriminations, Bonney. What's done is done. I want peace in Lincoln County. . . ."

"You can have it, sir," Billy said. "By—"

The general interrupted impatiently. "Let me finish. I said, no recriminations, no accusations. Here's my proposition. Surrender yourself."

"No!" exploded Billy.

"Surrender and stand trial," General Wallace went on, grimly. "Let's say, for the killing of the sheriff. I guarantee you a fair trial, an honest trial . . ."

John Forester said, "There were extenuating circumstances, Billy."

Billy the Kid turned cold eyes on the prosecutor. "You didn't say so before."

"I've re-examined my evidence."

The general pawed the air with a hand. "Let me finish," he said, testily. "I guarantee you a fair trial, Bonney, but in the event you are convicted, I promise you, right now, a full and complete pardon." He leaned back in his chair. "Could I do better than that?"

The Kid regarded the general steadily, then shifted his look to the prosecutor. Forester nodded. Billy's smoldering eyes went back to the governor.

"I've got to be in jail until the trial?"

"Of course."

"Dracker runs the jail," The Kid said, simply.

"He wouldn't dare try anything," exclaimed the general. He made another impatient gesture. "All right, we'll transfer you to Las Cruces . . . Las Vegas. . ."

"Murphy's got men in all those places," said The Kid. "I'd never get to court."

"I've given you my promise, Bonney," exclaimed the general. "What more do you want? A military guard? All right, you can have that!"

The hotel door opened quietly and Nell Forester came out. "Billy," she said softly.

The Kid's eyes went to her. "Miss Nell," he said, gently.

"I've told them what you did for me," Nell Forester said.

"How you risked your life by coming back here. . . ."

"It's all right," The Kid said.

"Do it, Billy," pleaded Nell. "Do what the governor asks. John promised me everything would be all right."

The Kid's eyes went around the circle, to Forester, the general and finally to Hardie. "Wells Fargo?" he asked.

Hardie shook his head. "My only interest is in the men who held up the stage."

"It wasn't me," Billy said.

"Then you've nothing to worry about from my end."

Billy weighed the evidence in his mind and while he was still undetermined, a violent commotion broke out, in front of the Murphy & Dolan store. Four men came dashing out, mounted their horses and galloped away. A wild yell rose from them.

On the hotel veranda, a bitterness settled over Billy the Kid's face. "I'll think about it, Governor," he said, heavily.

"If you don't accept," the governor warned, sternly, "the alternative is . . . your destruction!"

"I'll let you know."

"Billy!" the cry came from Nell, a desperate wail.

"Good-by, Miss Nell," said Billy the Kid. There was anguish in his voice. He turned, went to the steps and descended to the street.

General Wallace got to his feet and stepped to the edge of the porch. "Forty-eight hours, Bonney," he said, in cold anger. "That is what you'll get. Not one minute more."

Hardie came to a sudden decision. He went to the stairs. "Wait, Billy, I'm going with you."

The Kid had mounted his horse by the time Hardie came down the stairs. "I can find my own way," he told Hardie, bluntly.

Hardie mounted his own horse and fell in beside The Kid. They rode down the street at an easy canter, putting their animals into a trot after they had passed the Murphy & Dolan store.

On the hotel veranda, Nell Forester stared after them.

She said, softly, almost a sob, "Good-by, Billy. . . ."

A mile from Lincoln, Hardie and The Kid came to a fork in the road. Billy pulled up his horse and Hardie was compelled to stop his own.

"You've made a mistake, Hardie," The Kid said. "Best thing you can do is go back—and keep on traveling. Get out of Lincoln County, out of New Mexico."

"I guess I've got a little of you in me," Hardie said, doggedly. "I can't quit. I'm here on a job and I've got to finish it."

"I told you back there," Billy persisted. "That stage business wasn't any of my doing. They tried to put it on me, but I give you my word. . . ."

"You don't have to," said Hardie. "I know who it was. Dracker and some of his friends. Their Indian disguise was a little too obvious. They wanted to throw it on you. But they made one little mistake. They didn't examine the shoes of their horses. One of them had a triangular chunk of horse-shoe broken off. It left a distinctive mark. I found that same hoofprint out in front of Murphy's store. . . ."

"Where else?" Billy shrugged, then drew a deep breath. "From here I travel alone."

"I'd like to ride with you."

"No," The Kid said, bluntly. "I know what you're thinking. They're waiting for me." He laughed harshly. "The fools. They ought to know by now that I never return to the same place." He pointed to the left fork of the road. "That's the way to La Luz. Only I'm not going there." He shot an angry look at Hardie. "I'll be all right."

"Fine, Billy," Hardie said, easily. He gave the young outlaw a half salute. "Good luck."

"Luck," said Billy and turned his horse down the right fork.

Hardie waited a moment, then turned and rode back toward Lincoln. He put his horse into an easy jog, but after a hundred yards or so, turned a bend in the road and pulled up. He waited three minutes, then turned his horse and rode back to the fork.

Without slackening his pace, he turned into the left road, the road to La Luz. As he rode, he drew his Winchester from the rifle scabbard.

There were four horses in front of the little store in La Luz. Hardie rode past them, then dismounted and went back toward the little store. Gripping his rifle easily, he called:

"Sheriff?"

Across the street, behind Hardie, Dracker stepped out from an adobe hut. "Wells Fargo," he called, mockingly.

Half whirling, Hardie threw himself to the ground. Moving so quickly, he caught Dracker off balance. Dracker's gun fired, but the bullet missed Hardie. Hardie's first Winchester bullet caught Dracker fairly. As he reeled back, his three deputies swarmed out of other buildings. They came shooting.

Hardie rolled over, trying to get the horses between himself and the deputies. Bullets kicked up dirt around him. One hit a horse and sent it rearing and pitching. The kicking forced Hardie to come up to his feet, into the open. The three deputies cried out and converged upon Hardie.

Then, into the melee, came a thundering, charging horse, ridden by Billy the Kid. Bollinger went down. Evans tried to seek safety in flight, but The Kid went after him and downed him, mercilessly. The fourth man ran squarely toward Hardie . . . and ran into a bullet.

When The Kid came back from pursuing Evans, Hardie was kneeling by the dying acting sheriff. His eyes found Billy. "D-don't shoot, Kid," gasped Dracker. "I—I'm dying. . . ."

"You've tried to get me often enough," The Kid said, bitterly. He raised his revolver, but Hardie threw up a detain-ing hand.

"Hold it, Billy." He turned to Dracker. "It was you held up the stage?"

"What . . . difference . . . now?" gasped Dracker, in anguish. A shudder went through him and he went limp. Hardie got to his feet.

"Doesn't mean a thing," said Billy. "Murphy'll put in another sheriff. Done it before." His eyes smoldered. "Satisfied?"

"About you, yes," said Hardie. "You guessed I'd ride this way . . . to get them?"

"Told you you were a fool," snapped Billy. "I didn't guess, if you must know. I had a score to settle with them and I knew I'd find them here." He gestured angrily. "Get out of this country, Hardie."

"I guess I will, now," said Hardie. He nodded. "Good-by, Billy."

The Kid snorted and turned his horse away. He applied spurs and the animal took off at a gallop.

Billy the Kid rode . . . to his destiny.

The Auction

IN THE COURSE of time, Wells Fargo accumulated a great number of undeliverable express packages. Parcels were addressed incorrectly, the addresses of senders was left off, people moved and left no forwarding addresses. People died and the packages were unclaimed. Many parcels, in the course of a year, were unclaimed for any one of many reasons.

It was the custom to hold an auction, once a year, at specified division points. The general public bid on the express packages. Sometimes they bid briskly on parcels, which opened, turned out to be valueless. Once—once in a great while—a treasure was bought for a trifling amount.

A sale had been announced for Temple City and Special Agent Jim Hardie, for certain reasons, had come to attend the sale. He got off the train a short time before the auction was due to be held. He stood around awhile, apparently absorbed in the local scenery, but watching, out of the corner of his eye, an attractive young woman who had got off the

train and was moving purposefully from the depot toward the express office, a short distance up the street.

A grizzled old-timer, wearing overalls, a musty tailcoat and a battered straw hat watched Jim Hardie, watching the girl. Hardie, starting to follow the girl, stopped and turned to the oldster.

The old boy grinned at Hardie.

"Anybody ever tell you," said Hardie, "that you look like an old-time outlaw?" He snapped his fingers to recollect. "What was his name?"

The grizzled one chuckled. "Bob Dawson. People are always takin' me for him."

"Wonder whatever happened to him?" mused Hardie.

"Nothing," was the reply.

"Seems to me he kind of disappeared," said Hardie. "Just faded away."

"Uh-uh," said the old boy. "He retired. Comes a time when a man gets tired of night riding and hidin' out." He grunted. "Ain't no warrants out for old Bob Dawson, nossir. He was too smart for 'em. . . ."

Hardie smiled. "You are Bob Dawson?"

"Yep," said the old boy. "But don't waste your time tryin' to dig up any old ones on me. I'm clean as a whistle." He whistled to point up his phrase.

"Glad to hear it," said Hardie.

"What are you?" continued Bob Dawson. "Pinkerton man . . . government?"

"Wells Fargo," said Hardie.

Dawson nodded. "Good company. Yessir, good company," he chuckled. "Used to do a little business with 'em. Hope they don't hold any hard feelings against me."

"As far as I know," said Hardie, "they don't."

"That's the decent thing," said Old Bob, cheerfully. "Don't hold grudges myself. Friends with everybody. Come out and see me sometime. Maybe I can give you some pointers—from the other side of the trough, you might say." He grunted again. "These young squirts don't know how to do a good job. Just rush up, shoot, grab the money and run. No finesse. In my time it was a business. You figured out a good job and you went ahead and did her clean. Why, I mind the time, up at Rocky Flats . . ." He grimaced. "Maybe I better not tell about that one."

Hardie said: "I'd like to hear if you have the time."

"Got nothin' but time. But I'm puttin' that one in my memoirs. That's what I'm doin' now—writin' my memoirs."

Callin' it *The Life and Times of Bob Dawson*. Gonna be good, too."

"Names and dates?" asked Hardie, cheerfully.

"Whenever it won't hurt nobody. Me, I been retired for ten years and nothin' nobody can prove on me. I was careful all the time. But some of my friends . . ." He shook his head, sadly. "That's one of the things I'm takin' up in the book. A whole chapter, maybe two. Advice to these Johnny-come-latelies who think the only thing that's important is the size of the payload. That's why they wind up in jail—or out on Boot Hill."

"I'll look forward to reading your book, Mr. Dawson," Hardie said, politely. "And it's been a pleasure meeting you. Come down to the train often?"

"Every day," said Old Bob. "Like to watch 'em come in and go out. Breaks up the day. This tame life gets a leetle monotonous at times. I got no bad habits, don't drink . . ." He brightened. "Say, that was a pretty girl got off the train."

"Still like beautiful women?" chuckled Hardie.

"Yep. But these days, I just look."

"Glad to make your acquaintance." Hardie extended his hand. The old retired outlaw took it and shook warmly.

"Few years ago we might have been shootin' at each other, instead of this," he said. "Maybe I am gettin' old. Shaking the hand of a lawman."

"Won't contaminate you."

Hardie was about to go off, into the town, but Old Bob Dawson fell in beside him. "What are you doin' here in Temple City? Wells Fargo trouble?"

"No, I just stopped off to attend the express auction."

"The auction," exclaimed Dawson. "I clean forgot. Auctions are fun. I'll walk over with you."

Not more than twenty people had gathered on the street in front of the Wells Fargo office. The auctioneer surveyed the small crowd, glumly. He picked up a glass of water, gargled and spat out the water, then banged his hammer on the platform before him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I am sorely disappointed there are not more of you here to attend this, one of the most interesting auction sales ever held in the West. But I hope the few of you who are standing before me will bid spiritedly . . . for the parcels we have here are mysterious as to their content." He leaned forward, warming up.

"They may contain a priceless fortune, or, on the other hand, perhaps only a few hundred dollars worth of merchandise."

His eyes met those of Jim Hardie, who had stopped at the rear of the small crowd, with Old Bob Dawson.

"Few hundred dollars," grunted Old Bob. "Listen to that man!"

"Lays it on pretty good," grinned Hardie.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the auctioneer bellowed. "The auction is ready to commence. Item number one . . ." He picked up a large, paper-wrapped bundle. "An unclaimed parcel sent by Elihu Montague of Syracuse, New York, to a Miss Lizzie Bailey, who apparently moved or failed to claim her parcel. Who can say what it contains? A fur coat? Imported linens? A magic lantern? Whatever it is, it is now on the block. What am I bid?"

"Two bits," called out Old Bob.

"Twenty-five cents for this," cried the auctioneer. "You are joking, sir. Good for you. I like a man with a sense of humor. Now, to the serious bidding. What do I hear? Twenty dollars? Ten? Five? Speak up."

A heavy silence remained upon the crowd.

"Three dollars?" pleaded the auctioneer. "Two?" He paused, then pointed his hammer at Old Bob. "Sold for twenty-five cents—to the gentleman with the sense of humor."

Old Bob winked at Hardie and shuffled forward. He tossed a quarter to the auctioneer's clerk, claimed his package. He started to untie it but the auctioneer pointed at him with the hammer.

"Nothing is to be opened on these premises, sir. Take the package home with you and there, in the privacy. . . ."

He was too late. Bob Dawson had ripped open the package and exposed a woman's corset, a corset intended for a somewhat stout woman. It was an old corset, too. A roar of laughter went up.

Dawson exhibited the corset. "A few hundred dollars' worth of old corset." He tossed it away and started back toward Hardie.

The auctioneer stepped to an old wooden crate. "What am I bid for this? It looks imposing. Who knows what is inside?"

"Two bits," said Old Bob.

"Fifty cents," called a timid voice in the crowd.

"One dollar," said another bidder.

"Two dollars," said a third.

"I have a bid of two dollars for this crate," said the auctioneer. "Do I hear more? Two dollars, do I hear more? Two dollars once, two dollars twice. . . . sold for two dollars!"

He moved briskly to his next item, a battered old suitcase, tied up with ropes. Hardie, watching the girl from the train, saw her suddenly move forward.

"Item number three," the auctioneer went on. "This old suitcase. But who can say what treasure might lie inside? I admit it looks ancient and worn, yet this humble and modest exterior could be deceiving. Ladies and gentlemen, I beg you to not to disappoint me again with paltry bids that insult not only man's intelligence but his imagination. Bid up this time, bid high. Live recklessly."

"Two bits," said Old Bob.

The auctioneer glared at him. "Our friend with the sense of humor. . . ."

"Two dollars," came the clear voice of the girl from the train.

Dawson turned and looked at her. A few feet behind the girl, a swarthy, hawk-faced man wearing cowboys' clothes, said: "Three dollars."

"Four dollars," said the girl, promptly.

Bob Dawson shuffled up to Hardie. "They're spoilin' all the fun," he complained.

The auctioneer had received a new lease of life. "Four dollars, I've been bid. Four dollars once. . . ."

"Five," said the swarthy man.

"Ten," called the girl.

The swarthy one grinned thinly. "Fifty dollars," he said, in a ringing voice.

A murmur went up in the crowd. All eyes went to the girl.

"A hundred dollars," she said, with a note of desperation in her voice.

Beside Jim Hardie, Old Bob said, suddenly: "Two hundred." He grinned weakly at Hardie. "Might as well make it interesting."

"Two hundred and one," said Hardie, smiling at the old retired outlaw.

"Hey, you," chuckled Old Bob, with a glint in his rheumy eyes. "All right, let's have fun. Two hundred and two."

"Two hundred and three," shouted the swarthy bidder.

The auctioneer's eyes caught those of Hardie. Hardie held up both hands, his fingers spread out.

The auctioneer banged his hammer on the stand. "Sold to Mr. Jim Hardie—for two hundred and ten dollars."

The swarthy man strode forward. "Wait a minute, I heard no bid. . . ."

"It was a hand signal, sir," said the auctioneer.

Old Bob began to shuffle forward. "Mr. Hardie works for Wells Fargo. Can a Wells Fargo employee bid on these things?"

"Perfectly legal, sir," replied the auctioneer.

"I say it isn't," said the girl, angrily.

Hardie moved forward. "What's all the fuss about? It's only an old suitcase."

The girl said spitefully: "Then why do you want it?"

Hardie smiled at her angry face. "Just took a chance. An uncle of mine once got a gold mine by buying a piece of what looked like junk. . . ."

The auctioneer held up a small parcel. "Item number four . . ." he called out.

Old Bob brightened. "Two bits," he called out.

Hardie moved up to the front, paid out two hundred and ten dollars to the auctioneer's clerk and claimed the battered old suitcase. He went off with it, up the street to a cross street, then down it to the hotel, a block away.

The street was deserted, but as he passed a spreading old oak, a man stepped out from behind the tree—the swarthy man from the auction. A gun was in his hand. He brought it down upon Hardie's head, a hard, stunning blow.

Hardie pitched forward to his face. He did not quite lose consciousness, but for a moment or two, he was aware only of a humming in his ears. When it cleared, he opened his eyes and got to his feet, with an effort.

A thousand little devils seemed to be inside his head. Each was armed with a tiny hammer and each individual devil banged away with the hammer. Some of the devils looked like Old Bob Dawson.

He stood for a moment with his stomach heaving, in danger of retching. The girl from the train and auction came up.

"Mr. Hardie!"

"Yes, ma'am." Hardie began to brush off his trousers.

"Where is it?" she demanded.

"The suitcase?" He looked around and was not surprised to find that it was gone—gone with the man who had smashed him to the ground.

"I must have it," the girl said, desperately. "I'll pay you. It's very important to me."

"It must have been important to somebody else, too," said Hardie. "It's gone."

"Please!" she cried. "I have no idea what you're up to, but . . ."

"Want to feel the lump on my head?" asked Hardie, touching it, gingerly. "I was bushwhacked."

"You mean someone's stolen the suitcase?"

Hardie nodded. The girl exclaimed poignantly, "How could you let them!"

"Wasn't much I could do. Fella hit from behind. . . ."

Angrily, the girl started to turn away. Hardie grabbed her arm, detained her. "Not so fast. You say that old suitcase was important to you. Why?"

"It—it belonged to my father. He's dead now. There are souvenirs in it, that I want. His gold watch, other trinkets. Family heirlooms. Nothing of real value, but it's all I have left of either of my parents and to me those old worn-out things are priceless."

"That's a pretty impressive inventory for an unclaimed suitcase," Hardie observed. "How do you know all those things are in it?"

"I was told." The girl's anger rose once more. "Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Yes. Your name?"

"It's Vivian Coy."

"I thought so," said Hardie.

"You knew it," declared Vivian. "You—you were on the train. You followed me here."

Hardie hesitated, then nodded. "That's right. That man who bid against you, for the suitcase—the dark one. Any idea who he is?"

"No," she said, promptly.

"They call him the Sundance Kid. He was a partner of a man who robbed one of our stages, once. Cleve Yance."

She did it well. Not even by the blinking of an eyelash did she reveal that she had ever heard of Cleve Yance. Hardie went on. "We caught Yance, but we didn't get the money he stole. . . ." He paused. "Do you suppose he could have shipped it to himself in that old suitcase . . . figuring on picking it up later?"

"The suitcase is mine," Vivian declared firmly.

"That's what you say. But maybe the Sundance Kid thinks it belonged to Yance. Otherwise, why would he be willing to pay over two hundred dollars for an old suitcase—a pig in a poke?"

Vivian said, fervently: "I assure you, Mr. Hardie, all that suitcase contains is exactly what I told you."

She turned and strode off. Hardie watched her go.

Hardie spent an hour poking around the sleepy little town. He talked to people here and there, merchants, storekeepers, idlers on the street. A hardware-store man was the most voluble.

"No, sir," he said, "never have seen the Sundance Kid in town before, but there was talk he was holed up somewhere in the hills. Must have taken a lot to bring him into town."

Hardie nodded thoughtfully. "You've got another celebrity in your midst. . . ."

The hardware man grinned. "You mean Old Bob Dawson? Shucks, he's nothing—not anymore. Just an old he-wolf who lost his teeth."

"He's behaving himself these days?"

"Sure is. You might even call him a model citizen. Must have had some money when he retired. Pays cash for everything. We're glad to have him here."

"Outside of the fact that he pays cash for everything, what makes you glad?"

"Way we figure it," the merchant said, "once his memoirs are printed, it'll put Temple City on the map. Tourists'll be flocking here to see where he lives. He isn't much now, but in his time Bob Dawson was a very famous man."

"That he was," conceded Hardie, his eyes going past the merchant to the livery stable, where Vivian Coy was talking earnestly to the liveryman.

"Old Bob's a gabby old codger," the merchant went on, "but we like him and there ain't no harm in him. . . ."

"Thank you," said Hardie, somewhat hastily. He left the hardware man abruptly and started toward the livery stable. Before he reached it, Vivian Coy went past him, riding a sleek bay filly.

It took five minutes for Hardie to rent a horse and follow after the girl. She was out of sight, but he put the animal into a mile-eating pace.

She kept a swift pace, apparently, for a half hour went by and Hardie still had not caught up with her. He leaned over now and then in the saddle to check the hoofprints of her horse. It was going fast, over soft ground and he had no difficulty in following the trail.

He topped a rise after awhile and saw her. Her horse was at the edge of a wide river. She was trying to force it into the water, but the animal was apparently stubborn.

Hardie touched the flanks of his mount and sent it downhill at a gallop. She heard his horse and looking over her shoulder, urged her own animal into the water.

The animal pitched and heaved and even as Hardie pulled up at the water's edge, she was thrown from her saddle into the water. She was a poor swimmer, it seemed, and when Hardie saw her floundering he leaped from his horse and plunged into the stream.

He reached her with a few quick strokes, but she seemed reluctant to be rescued. He managed the job, however, and a moment later set her down on shore. Instead of thanking him, she snapped at him.

"Why were you following me?"

"Just in case something like this happened," he replied.

Her horse floundered to the bank, climbed out and shook herself. Hardie grinned at Vivian.

"Now, just where is it we're going? You and me . . . and these horses."

"I'm going to find the man you call the Sundance Kid."

"How do you expect to do that?" asked Hardie. "Way I hear it, he's hiding out."

"I have information where to look for him," she said.

"Somebody in town? Or did Cleve Yance give it to you?"

She flared up. "I've told you, I don't know anyone named Cleve Yance."

A bullet whined overhead; it was followed by the sharp report of a rifle. Instinctively, Hardie grabbed Vivian and dragged her down to the ground. He drew his revolver and waited.

Vivian exclaimed. "Who shot at us? Why doesn't he show himself?"

Hardie raised himself a few inches from the ground. "He is," he said. He got to his feet, still gripping his revolver.

Old Bob Dawson, carrying a Winchester repeating rifle, ambled out of a patch of brush. "Why, Mr. Hardie," he exclaimed. "I had no idea anyone was anywhere in this neighborhood."

"You mean you just go around shooting that thing?" Hardie asked, indicating the Winchester.

Old Bob showed offense. "No, I was huntin'. Thought I saw a white-tail deer, but to tell you the truth, my eye isn't as good as it used to be and it takes me four-five shots to hit somethin'." He shook his head sadly. "In the old days I used to be able to pop down a partridge with a pistol gun."

Vivian got to her feet and Old Bob beamed at her. "Good afternoon, miss. Now, don't tell me I scared you two into the water."

"Not quite," said Hardie.

"Why didn't you come right out after you fired?" Vivian demanded suspiciously.

"I'm in no hurry when I hunt. Got lots of time."

"Vivian," said Hardie, "this is Bob Dawson. He was one of the most famous outlaws of his time."

"Outlaw?" cried Vivian.

"And a good one." Old Bob appealed to Hardie. "Wasn't I?"

"The best."

"They don't make them like the Dawson brothers no more, ma'am," said Old Bob, proudly. "These young squirts comin' up, they're just plain, cold-blooded gun-happy killers, that's all. The color's gone out of the modern-day outlaw."

Hardie winked at Vivian. "Makes speeches at the drop of a hat."

"What he's tryin' to say, miss," Old Bob went on, "I'm livin' in the past." He saw a log nearby, walked to it and seated himself. Then he beamed at Vivian and Hardie. "I'll tell you somethin', Hardie, it's true, I do live in the past, more than you might think. Sometimes I don't really go hunting. Just wander around out here as if a big posse was after me and I'm going to outsmart 'em. Once in awhile I get so carried away I just lift up my rifle gun and fire at nothin'. Then I duck down, figurin' they'll come chargin' at me. I didn't see any deer, today. I was playin' a game. An old man's game. I'm sorry I scared you folks and even sorrier I had to lie about it, at first." He got heavily to his feet. "Well, I'll be gettin' on. I'd be obliged if you didn't talk about this in town. They'd think for sure I was gettin' old."

He gave them a little wave of good-by and ambled off, into the brush, from which he had appeared.

"Funny old codger," said Hardie.

Vivian stepped to her horse, reached into a saddlebag. "I'll be going now." She produced a revolver. "Alone," she added.

Hardie nodded. "You figure the Sundance Kid has that suitcase and you're going to get it, no matter what."

"No matter what," repeated Vivian.

"Haven't you forgotten?" asked Hardie. "I was the highest bidder. The suitcase belongs to me."

She mounted the horse, pointed the revolver at him. "If you try to follow, I'll shoot."

She spurred her horse and this time it went readily enough into the water. It began to swim strongly and Hardie saw that she would make it across the river. He got his own horse and mounted, but waited until she had made the crossing safely, before he sent his own horse into the water.

It was a mistake on Hardie's part, waiting. The ground on the far side of the river was harder and soon became rocky. Five minutes on her trail and Hardie lost it. He spent a half hour picking it up again and it was difficult following it even then.

An hour later, he had traveled less than two miles from the river, but then he rode into a box canyon and saw, at the far end of it, a weather-beaten shack.

This could be the Sundance Kid's hideout.

It was. The Sundance Kid was home, too. But he was dead. He lay on the ground in front of his cabin, sprawled out.

There was a bullet hole in his chest.

The door of his shack stood open. Hardie went in, found it meagerly furnished and absolutely filthy from long usage by a man who cared little about his own comfort. There were dishes scattered around. On some of them the food had dried, was so hard it would take hours of soaking to clean it off.

There was no suitcase in the cabin.

It was early evening when Hardie left his horse at the livery stable and walked to the hotel. Vivian Coy, wearing her street clothes, was on the veranda.

"Found the Kid, didn't you?" he asked.

"I didn't kill him," she replied, earnestly. There was a paleness in her features, a tenseness in her face.

"You can prove that?" Hardie asked.

"I don't have to—to you." She paused. "But I didn't do it."

"And the suitcase?"

"It was gone when I got there."

Hardie said, sarcastically, "So your father's gold watch is gone."

She winced, then sighed. "Mr. Hardie, the truth is, I don't know what's in the suitcase. I was told to come here, bid on it—and get it."

"By Cleve Yance?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

Hardie said, "The man you claimed you never heard of. He got the home-town papers up in the prison, saw the Wells Fargo ads about the annual auction. He knew he wouldn't be out in time to bid on the suitcase himself, so he sent you."

"I really didn't know there was money in it," she protested. "He told me he was innocent of that robbery."

"He was lying."

"I'm beginning to think so," she finally admitted.

"So why don't you wake up, now? Forget Cleve Yance. Take the train and go home."

"I'm on my way to the depot, now."

She gave him a wan smile, walked past him, to the sidewalk. Hardie watched her reach the main street, turn right. It was the direction of the depot.

He frowned. In the distance, the train whistle blew. On a sudden impulse Hardie stepped down from the hotel porch and started up the street.

The train was just pulling into the station, when Hardie reached it. He saw Vivian standing near the station agent. She was not moving toward the train.

A hard-faced man, wearing a "store" suit, swung down from the train. He saw Vivian and strode toward her.

Hardie moved forward and heard his greeting. "Hello, Hon," the man said to Vivian. He embraced her, but she was stiff, unyielding.

"I believed you, Cleve," she said, then. "Everything you said, I believed. I waited for you while you were in prison. Even tried to run your errand for you."

"Tried?" exclaimed Yance. "What do you mean—tried? You got it, didn't you? You got the suitcase?"

"No."

The man grabbed Vivian's arm, squeezed it so that she winced. "What is this, a double-cross? You let the Sundance Kid sweet-talk you? Is that it?"

"The Sundance Kid is dead," Vivian said.

"You're lying," snarled Yance. "Look, I haven't got time to fool around. Where's that suitcase? I spent a year in prison, for what's in that bag."

He stopped, scowling at Hardie, as the latter moved forward.

"Too bad, Yance, isn't it?" Hardie said. "That your time was up just one day too late for you to come here yourself."

"I remember you," glowered Yance. "I'll always remember you for sending me up and one of these days. . . ."

"Got out of jail a day late," Hardie taunted. "Had to send a girl to do a man's work. Now you're sore because she couldn't do it right. Well, let me tell you something, I find you bothering Miss Coy, I'm really going to give you a bad time."

He left them on the depot platform and walked back to

the hotel. He had dinner and spent the evening on the veranda, thinking . . . thinking.

The girl. Cleve Yance. The Sundance Kid.

The more he thought of it, the more puzzled he became.

It was close to midnight when the solution struck him. He was of half a mind then to go to the livery stable, but decided against it.

He went into his room, a small stuffy cubicle, and tossed fitfully on the lumpy bed. At sunrise, he was up and found the dining room in the hotel still closed.

He left the hotel, found the night hostler on duty at the livery stable and rented from him the same animal he had ridden the day before.

As he mounted, he asked: "Can you direct me to Old Bob Dawson's place?"

The hostler grinned. "Goin' visitin' with the old coot? He'll fill you so full of bull you won't know your right name by the time you get back."

Hardie chuckled, "I've got a little problem. Thought I'd get the criminal point of view, so to speak."

"Oh, you'll get that, all right. An' just about every other viewpoint. Take the north road. Go two miles, turn right on the little road, by the two oak trees. Up the hill and you'll see his spread."

There were barns and corrals on Old Bob's little ranch, but there was only a single horse in the corral and there were no cows or steers anywhere in the vicinity. A dilapidated old buggy stood in front of the main barn.

Hardie dismounted a short distance from the house, which was sadly in need of paint. As he approached it, Old Bob stepped out of his front door. The Winchester was in his hands.

"That's far enough, Hardie," he said. "You can stop right there."

A steeliness had come into the old boy's tone. He was more like the old Bob Dawson must have been.

Hardie stopped. "What kind of hospitality is this? I just stopped by for a little visit."

"What you want to visit about?"

"Why, I thought we might talk about the suitcase."

"The suitcase, hey?"

"Yes, you know, the one we were all bidding for yesterday. I got it and the Sundance Kid got it from me. Then somebody took it away from him. Took a good man to do that."

"I'm a good man."

"I know you are." Hardie paused. "Did you take it from him?"

"These young punks," Old Bob said, scornfully. "They don't know their revolver work anymore. Takes practice and they ain't got time. Me, I'm old and you might say slow, but experience counts. Don't let them tell you different."

"So you took the suitcase from the Kid?"

"I didn't say that."

"Cleve Yance came in on the evening train. You know that, don't you?"

"How would I know it?"

"Prison grapevine's a pretty powerful thing. It can keep retired outlaws like you up to date on just about everything. Such as when a man's due to get out, the description of a suitcase full of money that's ready to be auctioned off by Wells Fargo."

"I haven't got it!"

"Then you don't mind if I take a little look around?"

"I do mind," snapped Old Bob. "You inferring I'm still an active outlaw?"

"Maybe you're just getting more material for your memoirs."

Hardie takes a careless step forward. Bob Dawson whips up his rifle. "Hardie!" he cried. "Look out!"

Hardie starting to whirl, had a glimpse of a man darting out from behind the barn. He threw himself forward. Old Bob's rifle barked. There was a reply from another gun, then Dawson's gun fired a second time.

Hardie got to his feet. Cleve Yance lay on the ground, near the barn. He turned back to the house. Bob Dawson was gone. He had gone inside.

But, even as Hardie moved forward, the old man appeared at a window.

"Dawson," said Hardie, "that was Cleve Yance. He was after both you and me. Me, for locking him up, you for the suitcase."

"You're not getting that suitcase," rumbled Old Bob. "Now, get out of here. I'm givin' you fair warning. You get off this ranch. Or I'll blast you. . . ."

"After just saving my life?"

The Winchester roared. A slug missed Hardie by about two inches. "I missed that one on purpose," Dawson called out. "The next one won't miss. I'll count to five. . . ."

Hardie turned and began running. But instead of heading for his horse, he veered sharply to the side of the house.

Hardie wondered even as he ran if the old boy really remembered all of the old tricks.

The back-door trick, for instance.

He reached the side of the house, whirled and doubled back on his tracks.

Just as Old Bob came backing out of the house, apparently to get away from Hardie, supposedly coming in, from a back window.

Hardie stepped up behind the old outlaw and thrust his revolver into the small of the old man's back.

"The suitcase is in the house," Old Bob said.

On the station platform Old Bob Dawson held up his manacled hands. "Need these for a old man like me?" he asked Hardie.

Hardie grinned. "You're lucky I don't use chains on your ankles. The way that brain of yours ticks."

Old Bob was pleased. "Had you guessin' on this one, didn't I?"

Hardie shook his head in admiration. Then Vivian Coy came on the platform. She smiled wanly at Hardie and moved down to the far end to wait for the train.

Old Bob shook his head. "That may be the last pretty woman I'll ever see."

"With time off for good behavior . . ." began Hardie.

Old Bob Dawson chuckled. "I won't really mind prison at all. I've got lots of old friends there. We'll play cribbage, talk over old times. Besides, I'll have time to finish up my memoirs."

"You've got a lot more to write than anybody'd guess," said Hardie.

Far down the rails, the lonesome whistle of the train wailed over the countryside.

Belle Starr

AS TROUBLE SHOOTER for Wells Fargo, Jim Hardie covered a lot of territory in the course of a year. He met many strange people, some good some bad. Much of his work was routine, but some of it was anything but routine and while many of the people he encountered were on the unsavory side, one of them—a bandit—was most certainly not unpleasant.

She was the only woman outlaw this country has ever known.

Belle Starr.

The train was just pulling out of a small depot when she came along the aisle, carrying a suitcase and a heavy pasteboard box, of the sort women's hats are delivered in by the better millinery stores.

She was wearing a flowered print dress, right out of Godey's *Ladies' Book*. She stopped at the vacant seat, beside Hardie, who was seated by the window. She deposited the suitcase in the seat and reached up to deposit the pasteboard box in the luggage rack overhead.

Hardie rose to his feet. "Ma'am," he said, smiling and took the box from her. He put it on the rack and followed up by stowing away the suitcase.

The attractive passenger smiled pleasantly. "Thank you," she said, seating herself in the aisle seat.

Hardie remained standing. "Would you prefer the window seat?"

She shook her head. "This is quite all right."

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Hardie sat down beside her. He sent her a sidelong glance and met her eyes. She blushed prettily. "I—I'm not used to traveling," she said. "My grandmother in St. Louis is very ill and Mama thought I should pay her a visit, just in case. . . ."

"Your ma's right, Ma'am. . . . Miss . . .?"

She smiled wanly. "It's Mrs.—Mrs. Reed. I'm a widow."

"Sorry to hear that. My name is James Hardie."

She nodded acknowledgment. "It's all right, Mr. Hardie. It—it happened awhile ago and I'm just about over it."

Then, to belie her words, she sniffed and reached for her handbag. She took out a small square of lace and dabbed at her nostrils. Hardie watched sympathetically.

"Could I get you a magazine—or some fruit?" he asked, at a loss for words to comfort her.

"No, thank you," Mrs. Reed replied. "I'm quite all right . . . now!"

Engrossed with his seat companion, Hardie had been unaware that the train had been slackening speed. It came to a sudden, abrupt halt, and Hardie, unprepared, lurched forward. He threw out his hands to keep from bumping the back of the seat ahead. The woman beside Hardie, however, had been better prepared and the sudden stopping of the train did not bother her.

Outside, a gun was discharged. It was followed by a short fusillade. Up and down the day-coach passengers began springing to their feet.

"Holdup!" was the cry.

The front vestibule door was slammed inwards and a swarthy man, a revolver in his fist, came through.

"Don't nobody move," the man with the gun ordered. "This is a holdup."

"Be damned," muttered Hardie. His right hand went under his coat, gripped the butt of the short-barreled revolver in his shoulder holster.

Mrs. Reed, beside Hardie, brought her hand out of her handbag. It contained a very capable-looking revolver.

"I wouldn't, Mr. Hardie," she said.

Hardie stared at her. "I'll be doggoned," he said, slowly. "You're in with them!"

Mrs. Reed said, sweetly, "I'm afraid so." A half sigh escaped her lips. "I'm a poor widow woman and I've got to make a living. . . ."

Her left hand reached out and flicked back Hardie's coat. The hand plucked the revolver from Hardie's shoulder holster.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hardie."

Smiling, she rose and stepped out into the aisle. Ahead, the swarthy man, winked at her. Mrs. Reed said, loudly and firmly: "Mr. Blue Duck is now coming among you to take up a collection. Please give freely and generously." To emphasize her remarks she raised her gun and fired a bullet into the ceiling of the day coach.

"And don't anyone hold out!"

Blue Duck took off his large hat and thrust it at a passenger in the first seat. A watch and wallet were deposited in it. He carried the hat across the aisle and collected some bills from a roughly dressed man. The man brought out some silver.

"Never mind the chicken feed," said Blue Duck. He knocked the hand holding the silver aside and the coins scattered on the floor.

Mrs. Reed stepped aside to allow Blue Duck to thrust his hat at Jim Hardie.

"Shell out."

Hardie thrust a hand into his trousers pocket, brought out a crumpled bill and some silver. He looked quizzically at Blue Duck and tossed the bill into the hat.

"I'm traveling light."

"Dig again!" snapped Blue Duck.

Hardie hesitated, looked into the grim face and reached into his breast pocket. He brought out a wallet and skinning out a sheaf of bills deposited them into the hat.

Blue Duck smiled, nastily: "That's better."

Blue Duck, with Mrs. Reed remaining where she could watch the passengers, finished his collection. He was turning back up the aisle when three shots were fired outside. They were evenly spaced and were apparently a signal.

Blue Duck handed the overflowing hat to Mrs. Reed and took Hardie's revolver from her. Mrs. Reed smiled and called out to the day coach at large: "Thank you. Thank you, one and all."

She turned and walked to the vestibule door. Blue Duck remained to cover her retreat, a revolver in each hand.

"Don't nobody try anything!"

He waited until his female accomplice had cleared the day coach, then backed to the door himself. He put away one gun, opened the door and leaped out.

Instantly, there was a hubbub among the passengers. One or two ventured forward, but none followed the bandits. Hardie shoved a passenger aside and whipped open the door.

He stepped into the vestibule in time to see a rider, leading three saddled horses, dash up to Mrs. Reed. The female bandit, in spite of the encumbrance of her fancy dress, mounted expertly. Two men came running from the direction of the express car and in a moment, all of the bandit gang was mounted. The little group swirled around once, firing

their revolvers at the train, to discourage too prompt pursuit, then went off at a gallop.

Hardie turned back into the day coach, went to his seat and whipped down the hatbox and suitcase, left behind by Mrs. Reed. He ripped open the hatbox first, found that it contained a cheap ladies' hat. He tossed it aside, then tackled the suitcase. As he was opening it, the conductor came along the aisle.

"That her stuff?"

Hardie nodded. "Nothing valuable here. . . ."

The conductor frowned. "Don't you think we ought to leave that stuff for the U.S. marshal?"

"U.S. marshal?" asked Hardie, sharply.

"This is Indian territory."

Hardie shrugged and rummaged about in the suitcase. It was filled with worn, worthless clothing. The conductor cleared his throat.

"I don't think you ought to do that."

"I work for Wells Fargo," Hardie said. "I thought there might be a clue to the woman's identity. . . ."

"Identity?" snorted the conductor. "How many wimmen outlaws is there? It was Belle Starr. . . ."

Hardie nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps." He picked up the worn hat, looked on the inside of it. "Bon Ton Shop, Fort Smith, Arkansas," he read from a frayed label.

"That's Belle Starr, all right," snorted the conductor. "She lives near Fort Smith."

"How do you know?"

The conductor shrugged. "Everybody knows where Belle Starr lives. Sam Starr, her used-to-be husband, had a farm near Briartown." He shrugged. "That's Cherokee land."

"And she lives there?"

"More or less. The trouble ain't findin' Belle Starr. It's takin' her after you find her. The Starrs are a big crowd and they look after their people, even if Belle's only related to them by marriage."

By robbing the express car during the train holdup, Belle Starr's men had put themselves on Wells Fargo's list and as a special agent for Wells Fargo, it now became Jim Hardie's job to try to run down Belle Starr and her boys.

Careful inquiry in the general vicinity of Belle Starr's "country" had convinced Hardie that what the railroad conductor had told him was only too true. The job wasn't to find

Belle Starr, it was to take her out of her country and deliver her to the authorities. The Cherokees were peaceful but they protected their own, and Belle Starr was one of them, by marriage.

So, one day, Hardie rode into the tiny town of Briartown, astride a rangy, well-groomed horse and leading a dusty, unkempt-looking pack horse. The town consisted of barely a half block of false-fronted store buildings. It was a sleepy, tree-shaded hamlet. Hardie dismounted before the little hotel and tied his animals to the hitchrail. He took some time in the little job, giving the three or four loafers in front of the hotel time to size up his saddle horse.

A lean, swarthy man, whom Hardie had seen once before—during the train holdup—moved toward the hitchrail.

"That's a good-lookin' hunk of horse," he observed.

"Best in the Ozarks," Hardie replied, promptly.

The swarthy man ducked under the hitchrail and rubbed his hand down the flank and leg of the horse. "You from Missouri?" he asked, without looking at Hardie.

"I've been there.

The other man pursed up his lips and stepped back from the animal he was examining. He nodded thoughtfully. "Might be he can run a little."

"That he can," said Hardie, carelessly. "He's never been beat."

A grin started to crack the dark man's features, but he quickly erased it. "This is horse country, Mister," he said, "we got two-three horses around here can run."

Hardie frowned. "I'm just passing through. I don't want any trouble."

"Trouble?"

"You're making horse talk," Hardie said. "First thing you know, you and your friends'll be putting up money and bringing out a nag to run against my horse. We'll beat you—and there'll be trouble."

The other man regarded Hardie impassively. "You talk big with your mouth."

Hardie exhaled wearily. "I told you Lightning's never been beat. I've run him against the best in the Ozarks."

"There ain't a horse in the Ozarks can outrun a jackass," cut in the swarthy man. "We've got a horse around here can beat anything in four states and two territories and we got money to back it up."

"You're asking for it," said Hardie.

The dark man gave Hardie a jaundiced look and stepped back on the veranda. He whispered to his friends a moment, then one of the men went off. The others came back with the first man and looked over Hardie's horse. Hardie seated himself on the edge of the veranda and waited.

The plan was working. Before coming to Briartown he had learned that Belle Starr had a passionate love for fast horses. The price of a running horse never bothered her. When she found one she liked . . . she stole it.

Some forty-five minutes after riding into Briartown, Belle Starr showed up. She was accompanied by another swarthy man, whom Hardie had also seen at the train holdup.

Belle herself was now wearing a divided riding skirt, a pongee shirt and a soft hat. She had elkskin boots on her feet and she rode a fine, high-bred horse.

The first swarthy man, whose name Hardie had learned was Jim July, moved out to meet Belle and her cohort. "Here's the jasper wants to race with you, Belle." He indicated Hardie with the jerk of a thumb.

Hardie stepped off the veranda and grinned up at Belle. "This is a pleasure I hadn't counted on, ma'am."

Belle said, sharply: "Nor I."

The man with Belle regarded Hardie suspiciously. "I've seen you somewhere."

Belle's eyes were still on Hardie. "You didn't waste much time getting here."

Blue Duck exclaimed: "The train, Belle. He was on the train!"

"Of course," said Belle Starr.

Hardie nodded and addressed Belle. "You got eighty-two dollars of my money. And my gun."

"You may get some of the gun back," snapped Belle. "The bullets!"

"He's a railroad detective," exclaimed Blue Duck.

"Sure," said Hardie. "I knew the train was going to be held up. That's why there was no one to stop you."

"All right," said Belle, grimly. "You're not a detective. Then why did you come here?"

"Ma'am," grinned Hardie, "I could say it was because of you, but that wouldn't be quite the truth." He chuckled. "I'm here to make money."

"How?" demanded Belle, bluntly.

Hardie indicated his two horses. "My business is racing horses. I tried to warn him"—indicating Jim July—"that I

had an unbeatable horse, but he claims there're one or two around here that can beat us." He grinned wryly. "That's what makes a horse race."

Jim July said: "Belle's riding the horse that can beat anything out of the Ozarks."

Hardie stepped to one side, sent a quick look of appraisal over Belle's horse. "Uh-uh, not that little filly. Not by about ten lengths she couldn't beat my horse."

"You're sure of that?" Belle asked, tartly.

"Dead sure. Your nag hasn't got the height, the depth of chest, or the legs for it." He came to a quick decision. "In fact, I don't think that horse of yours can beat anything."

Blue Duck rode his horse forward. "Put your money where your mouth is."

Jim July chimed in: "Yeah, put up or shut up."

Hardie's eyes sent around the small ring of faces, hesitated, then shook his head. "It wouldn't be fair. Why, my pack horse could beat that little filly."

Blue Duck leaned down from his horse and grabbed a handful of Hardie's shirt front. "You're goin' just a little too far. I got a notion to. . . ."

Hardie knocked Blue Duck's hand away, took a quick backward step and smashed the Indian on the jaw. Blue Duck went over on his back. He rolled over, came up to his knees and reached for his gun.

Hardie's revolver seemed to leap into his hand.

Belle Starr rode her horse forward, between the two men. Hardie moved sideways quickly in order to keep Blue Duck covered.

Belle Starr exclaimed angrily:

"Stop it, you two. Blue Duck, get to your feet . . . and keep your hand away from your gun." She turned to Hardie. "Mister, you said your pack horse could beat my filly. Put up your money. . . ."

"How much?"

"Every dollar you've got," declared Belle. "And the horse too. Both of them."

"You'll cover?"

She nodded.

A half hour later most of the population of Briartown had moved out to the Fort Smith road, some half mile or so from the little hamlet. There was a straight stretch of road and this was to be the race track.

The proprietor of the general store, Haskell, was appointed the judge of the race and stakeholder of the money. Belle

Starr had suggested Blue Duck for the job, but Hardie had declined to accept the outlaw. Belle had not pressed the point.

About three fourths of the audience moved down to a large oak tree beside the road, some half a mile or more from the starting line. Jim July drew his revolver, ready to start the race, but Hardie held up his hand. He took a folded document from a pocket.

"Here's the bill of sale for my horses," he declared. "I think Mr. Haskell ought to hold this."

"We don't bother with such things around here," Belle Starr said.

"So I've heard," retorted Hardie, "but if I win I want a bill of sale from you. I may be riding back where there are sheriffs and marshals. . . ."

"You'll be walking," said Jim July.

Belle Starr took the bill of sale and handed it to Blue Duck.

"Ride down to the finish line," she ordered the Indian. "Hand this to Mr. Haskell."

Blue Duck glowered at Hardie and sent his horse away at a gallop. Belle and Hardie lined up their horses on the road and waited. After a while, Jim July called out: "Ready?"

The gun banged.

Hardie had planned his strategy. The animal he rode was far the swifter of his two mounts. Its appearance was deceiving. He had left it deliberately unkempt, uncurried. He knew what the horse could do, but he knew too, that Belle was a judge of horse flesh and had provided herself with the best horse to be found in the Indian Nations.

The distance was short and while his horse was at its best at a mile or more, he decided to ride it as if the race was a sprint. He put spurs to the animal's flanks, tore off his hat and began whipping the horse, from right to left.

He broke well and by terrific prodding got a lead of two lengths within a hundred yards. He rode as he had never ridden in his life. He held the two-length lead to within a rod of the finish line, then applied spurs and again whipped the animal with his hat. He forced another length lead out of the animal and they shot past the crowd gathered around the oak tree, with three lengths of distance between them.

Hardie pulled up his horse gradually and when he finally turned and rode back to the finish line, Belle Starr was already back and arguing heatedly with the stakeholder.

"He ran me off the road," she was declaring. "He fouled me and I'm the winner. . . ."

"Poor loser," said Hardie.

Belle Starr whirled on Hardie, raised her quirt and swung it at him. The whip raked his face, stingingly. She drew back to lash him again, but this time Hardie's hand shot out. He caught the whip and tore it from her hand.

Blue Duck rode up beside Hardie. His gun was in his hand, pointed at Hardie.

"Around here we don't stand for gents manhandlin' wimmenfolk."

"I was only defending myself," cried Hardie.

"You won, by running me off the road!" cried Belle. "I won, on a foul. . . ." She rode her horse toward Haskell. "Pay me!"

Haskell looked from Belle to Hardie. "Well, now, Miss Belle," he said, "I don't see rightly how I can. . . ."

Blue Duck swung his revolver from Hardie, at Haskell.

"Speak up, Mr. Haskell," he called. "The folks can't hear you. Who won?"

Haskell gulped. "Y-you did," he said, to Belle.

Blue Duck said, sarcastically, "You're an honest man, Mr. Haskell. You call them as you see them." He rode up to the stakeholder and thrust out a hand.

Haskell took a fat wad of bills from a pocket and handed them glumly to Blue Duck. The Cherokee in turn handed them to Belle.

Hardie said: "I've seen thieves in my times but this is about the worst bunch I've ever run across."

Blue Duck turned on him. "You want to back that up?"

Jim July rode up beside Blue Duck and Belle Starr. Hardie regarded them glumly, then shook his head. "I know when I'm licked."

"This'll teach you to ride fair," Belle said.

"Fair?" cried Hardie, indignantly. "Why . . ."

Blue Duck's revolver again covered Hardie. "Uh-uh, don't say it."

Jim July indicated Hardie's horse. "Climb down from that pony, mister. You lost him."

"You go back to the Ozarks and tell your people how we treat slickers down here," Belle Starr said.

Hardie looked into Belle Starr's eyes. "You approve of this?"

Her gaze faltered for an instant, but then she brazened it out. "Start walking. And be glad you're able to walk."

Hardie sent a glance around the group, then shrugged and dismounted. He gave the crowd a half salute.

"It's been nice knowin' you folks. Hope I don't see you again."

Jim July pointed his revolver at Hardie's heels. He fired and Hardie jumped and started running.

Blue Duck made a wide circling gesture. "Everybody back to town. Miss Belle's settin' 'em up. . . ."

A rumble of approval went up in the crowd.

The road was no more than a pair of twin ruts cut into virgin woodland sod. An occasional wagon passed over it and maintained the ruts.

Hardie sized up the tree with the low overhanging branches and going up to it, began to climb. He had to move swiftly for he had scarcely reached the overhanging limb than he heard the clopping of horses' hoofs.

Two riders, one of them leading a horse, appeared around a turn. They jogged along easily and passed under the overhanging limb, without noticing Hardie lying prone along the limb. Hardie let them go, his eyes on the road.

A horse and rider appeared. The rider was Belle Starr, but she was turned, her back to Hardie. She was gripping a lead rope, trying to force along a recalcitrant horse, Hardie's unkempt race horse.

The animal was giving her trouble and she was almost underneath the overhanging limb, before the horse decided to move along without urging.

Belle Starr turned to the front then, passed under the limb. Hardie raised himself into a crouch, then dropped lightly from the tree limb, into the saddle of the led horse. Ahead, Belle Starr whirled. She cried out in astonishment and her hand went for her revolver, but Hardie sending his horse forward, knocked the gun from her hand. In almost the same movement, his arm snaked around her waist and he whipped her from her mount. She put up a struggle, but he forced her down across his saddle pommel. She continued to struggle, but he held her down with force as he drove his horse off the road into heavy brush.

Belle's horse followed them.

A hundred yards from the rutted road, Hardie pulled up. He swung down from the saddle and caught Belle as she slid down from her awkward position. He gripped her about the waist with one arm, kept his other hand over her mouth.

Back on the road, Blue Duck and Jim July were riding back, searching for Belle Starr. They pulled up their horses,

milled around a moment, then continued on, back along the road.

In the brush, Hardie removed his hand from over Belle's mouth.

"I'll kill you for this," Belle said, furiously.

Hardie grinned. "Well, now, you might do just that." His grin became wider. "That is, if you had a gun—which you haven't got."

She tried to hit him with a raking blow, but he stepped aside. "Miss Belle," he said, easily, "there are two ways of doing a chore. The easy way and the hard way. You and me are going to take a little ride. Which way do you want to do it?"

"Neither way," snapped Belle, "because I'm not going with you."

Hardie reached to his horse and took down the riata from the saddle pommel. He shook it out into a noose. Belle suddenly guessed Hardie's intent and turned to run off. Hardie let the noose snake out. It settled about her shoulders, slipped down a few inches and when Hardie drew back on the rope, Belle found her arms pinned to her sides.

He made a hitch in the rope and still struggling, Belle found herself lifted onto the saddle of her horse. A few minutes later, Hardie was riding through heavy woods, leading Belle's horse, on which Belle sat stiffly.

It was an hour later that they came to a river. Hardie examined the flood waters and could see no signs of any shallows. He turned to Belle.

"I'll untie your hands."

"Don't bother," retorted Belle. She kned her horse and it was about to plunge into the water, when Hardie caught the bridle. He stopped the horse, then moved back and removed the lariat from about Belle.

"Thanks for nothing," she said, bitterly.

She glared at Hardie and sent her horse into the water. Hardie waited until she had gone a few yards, then moved his own mount into the river.

Belle's horse was soon swimming easily; it was apparently accustomed to this type of thing, but Hardie's animal had done very little swimming in its time and while most horses master the art rather easily, Hardie was disconcerted to discover that his race horse did not take well to water. Belle, looking over her shoulder, saw that Hardie was in difficulty. She urged her mount to greater exertion and suddenly the animal found itself in difficulty. Its head went under for a

moment, then the animal seemed to rise up on its hind legs. Belle was thrown from the saddle, into the water.

Hardie, alarmed, drove his horse forward. Belle was splashing wildly. Either she was a poor swimmer, or pretended to be, to further her purpose. The current was carrying her downstream. Hardie, exclaiming, plunged from his horse and swam after her, with swift, sure strokes.

Belle stopped splashing suddenly and began to swim, downstream, but she was no match for Hardie and he soon overtook her. She began to flounder when he grabbed her, but he was having no nonsense now. He gripped her staunchly and moved toward the far bank. As they reached shallow water and found footing, Belle snapped at Hardie:

"Thanks again—for nothing!"

"You don't give up, do you?"

"I fell," she said, angrily.

"Oh, sure," he replied carelessly.

Belle, trying to remove water from her clothes, exclaimed, "How much more of this do I have to put up with?"

"I don't know," said Hardie. "How far is it to Fort Smith?"

"Fort Smith?"

"That's where we're going."

She stared at Hardie. "So you're a detective, after all?"

He shook his head. "Wells Fargo man."

A gleam came into Belle Starr's eyes. "You'll never get me to Fort Smith."

"You want to bet?" Then grimacing, "I forgot. You're a poor loser."

Belle gave him a look of vast contempt and waded to the shore. Hardie followed her.

"We'll camp here for the night."

Later, they sat before a roaring fire. A coyote, on a nearby hill, raised his snout into the air and wailed his mournful plaint. Belle Starr, wrapped in Hardie's saddle blanket, shivered.

Hardie, stripped to the waist, reached for his shirt, which was spread out on a tree branch, before the fire. He found it slightly damp, but decided to put it on.

He said to Belle Starr, as he shrugged into the shirt: "Right now you don't look much like Belle Starr, the bandit queen."

"Bandit queen, my eye!" exclaimed Belle.

"That's what they call you in all the stories I've read about you."

"I've seen some of that trash," Belle said, scornfully. "Makes me out some kind of female Jesse James."

Hardie nodded. "Yeah, but don't forget, I was on the train when it was held up."

"That was the first train job I was ever in." Her white teeth worried her lower lip. "I needed the money."

"Lots of people need money, but they don't hold up trains to get it."

Belle threw back her head, her eyes blazing. "What do you know about such things? I was twelve years old when the Yankee soldiers burned down our house, in Missouri. We lived in a hole in the ground, on raw corn and whatever roots we could find. Don't talk to me about what's good and bad. I've had bad from the good and good from the bad. I've been on my own since I was fifteen. I married Sam Starr before I was sixteen. He was a shiftless, no-account horse thief, but when he died he left me a farm . . . and the only friends I've had in my whole life, members of the Cherokee Indian tribe. . . ."

"They're good people, the Cherokees," said Hardie. "Oh, they've got a bad one here and there, but there are plenty of bad whites, too."

He finished drawing on his boots, then stood up and tucked his shirt tail into his trousers. Belle looked up at him.

"We ride again?"

"Not before morning."

"The sooner you get me there, the sooner I'll hang."

"Hang?"

"Now, don't tell me you don't know who the judge is at Fort Smith?"

"I've never been to Fort Smith. All I know about the town's that the United States Marshal for the Indian Nations is headquartered there."

"So is Judge Isaac Parker."

A low whistle came from Hardie's lips. "The Hanging Judge!"

"You've heard of him?"

"Who hasn't?" exclaimed Hardie. "I forgot that he held court in Fort Smith."

"He's hanged eighty-some men," said Belle, soberly.

"Men. Not women."

"I think he'd like to hang a woman—just to break the monotony of things."

"Robbing a train isn't a hanging offense. No one was killed, or even hurt."

Belle shook her head. "Parker hung a man two years ago for stealing a horse." She laughed harshly. "He'd like nothing better than to get me into his court."

Hardie seated himself and watched Belle Starr across the flickering flames. She hitched up the blanket about her shoulders, stared into the fire. Then her eyes came up and met his.

"What's your name?" she asked, low.

"I told you on the train—Jim Hardie."

"It's a nice name. . . ." She leaned back on one elbow and gestured to him with her free hand. Hardie got to his feet and stepped around the fire. "Jim Hardie," she mused, and smiled up at him. "Bend down. . . ."

Hardie dropped to one knee beside her. She took his forearm in her hand, squeezed it. "You're not going to let him hang me, are you?"

"No," said Hardie, after a pause.

Her hand on his arm, pulled gently. Her lips were parted, there was an invitation in her eyes. Hardie leaned over and their lips met. Her arms went around Hardie, held tight. Their lips were still locked as her right hand went down, touched the holster about his waist.

Hardie pushed away from her, was barely in time to strike down with his hand, as the gun cleared his holster. It went off, the bullet tearing through his shirt. He caught her hand, tore the gun from it.

"Never give up, do you?" he asked, grimly.

She gave him a mocking, tantalizing laugh.

After a sleepless night, Hardie shook up the fire, added fresh fuel and made coffee. Belle Starr, rolled in her blanket, watched him for a while, then finally sat up.

"That coffee smells good," she said.

Hardie was in no mood for light palaver. He handed her a tin cup and when they had both had their coffee, he kicked sand over the fire. He folded up the blankets and stowed away his gear. Finally, he brought the horses, saddled, to the remains of the fire.

He shook out his riata. Belle looked at him questioningly, then held out her hands. He bound them and helped her mount. Still silent, they started off, following a trail that had never known the benefit of wagon wheels, but was otherwise well traveled.

It was mid-morning and they were jogging easily along the trail, Hardie slightly in the lead, when they approached two

trees, one on each side of the road. Hardie, who had been riding alert, watching the trail ahead and the woods on both sides, heard the creaking of leather behind him.

He swiveled about in the saddle, saw Belle shifting. His eyes met hers, still mocking and he turned again to the front and touched his horse's flanks lightly with his heels. At that instant, a lariat whipped up from the ground, tautened across the trail. Hardie caught one glimpse of it, tried to duck under it, but was too late. The lariat caught him just below the throat and tumbled him from the saddle.

He landed heavily, rolled over and reached for his gun. Blue Duck and Jim July leaped out from behind the two trees flanking the trail. Guns were trained on Hardie. A third man ran out from the underbrush to Belle Starr and cut the rope that bound her hands. She slid to the ground and rubbing her wrists, bore down on Hardie. Hardie got to his feet, to meet the mocking look of the bandit queen.

"Why, Mr. Hardie," she said, sweetly. "What happened to you?"

"I guess I underrated you," Hardie replied, ruefully.

"It happens all the time."

"He bother you?" Blue Duck asked Belle.

Belle Starr smiled tantalizingly and cocked her head to one side. "Did you, Mr. Hardie? Did you annoy me last night, when we camped together?"

Blue Duck scowled and made a threatening forward move, but Belle Starr gestured him back.

"Possum got your tongue, Mr. Hardie?" she asked.

"You're calling the tune, now," he replied, briefly.

She went on, sweetly sarcastic. "You were going to take me to Judge Parker's court—even after I told you he's called the Hanging Judge."

"It's my job."

Blue Duck scowled. "Job?"

Belle Starr turned to the Cherokee. "It seems our horse-racing friend is a detective after all. . . . Wells Fargo."

The other Cherokee, Jim July, said: "We ain't never robbed Wells Fargo."

"Oh yes, we have," said Belle. "It's Wells Fargo who runs the railroad express cars."

"That settles it," declared Blue Duck. "He gets what we'd give any other detective." He again moved forward, but Belle Starr threw up a detaining hand.

"So far we've never had to kill anyone."

"Think that'd make any difference to Judge Parker?" de-

manded Jim July. "He's hung men for murder and he's hung 'em for stealin' two dollars."

Blue Duck nodded. "That's it, Belle. He was going to take you to Judge Parker—"

Belle shook her head. "Boys, I've gone a long way with you, but murder, I just can't stomach it, somehow."

"You won't have to," said Blue Duck. "Just climb on your horse and head for home. You won't see nothin'—you won't hear nothin'."

"But I'll know."

"He's a detective, Belle," cried Jim July. "What else? He'd take you in to Judge Parker. . . ."

"You know what chance you'd have in Parker's court?" added Blue Duck.

"She might have a good chance," said Hardie. "Judge Parker may be strict, but he runs a United States court and—"

"You shut your trap," snarled Blue Duck.

July gestured to Belle. "Head for home, Belle."

Belle suddenly said: "I won't stand for murder."

Blue Duck sent a glance at Jim July, then faced Belle again. "Now wait a minute, Belle, you ain't talkin' for yourself alone. Me and the boys were with you on that train job. This monkey can identify us. Judge Parker gets us in his court and we hang for it, sure. He may let off a woman, but not us."

July said: "We ain't got no choice. It's him or us."

Blue Duck nodded emphatically. "That's the size of it. You can go or you can stay and watch. . . ."

His gun came up. Hardie said, quickly: "Now, wait a minute. . . ."

Belle made her decision at that instant. "Jim!" she cried. Her hand shot out, and the revolver she had been holding, flipped through the air, to Hardie.

Hardie caught the revolver, threw himself violently to the ground. Both Blue Duck's and Jim July's guns thundered, but the bullets went over Hardie's head as he pitched to the ground. On his back, Hardie fired at Blue Duck. The Cherokee cried out and broke in his stride. He fell to the ground on his face. Hardie came up to his knee, July fired a second time, but his bullet missed Hardie by almost an inch. Hardie's bullet caught him in the left shoulder.

The third train robber, who had watched the proceedings with open mouth, suddenly raised his hands. "I give up!" he cried.

Hardie gave him a sideward glance, then scooped up the guns dropped by July and Blue Duck. He tossed them both into the woods, then gestured to the rope that had torn him from the saddle.

"Tie him up," he said, indicating July. Then he pointed to Belle Starr. "And her."

Belle Starr cried out in consternation. "You can't! Not after I just saved your life!"

Hardie looked at her bleakly. "I've got to. It's my job."

Belle strode up to him and beat his chest with her fists. "What kind of a man are you?" she cried, hysterically. "I save your life one minute and the next you'd take me in to be hanged."

Hardie imprisoned her hand in his. "I'm sorry, Belle," he said. "I've taken in a lot of prisoners in my time, but this is the first time I've ever hated my job."

As it turned out, Jim Hardie was more nearly right than Belle Starr. Judge Isaac Parker listened to Hardie's account and sentenced the only woman bandit to appear before him, to a mild term of eighteen months in Detroit Federal Penitentiary. It was the best thing that could have happened to Belle Starr. It gave her time to think things over and when she came out of prison, she returned to her farm and the owl-hoot trail knew her no more.

Some months later, Jim Hardie received a postcard addressed to him at the San Francisco office. It was postmarked "Briartown, Indian Territory." It had a one-word message, "Thanks" and was unsigned.

Hardie smiled as he put the postcard into his breast pocket.

The Vigilantes

CARTER, manager of the San Francisco Wells Fargo office, banged down the lid of the Wells Fargo strongbox, to emphasize a point in his harangue.

"This strongbox," he said to Special Agent Jim Hardie. "It's become a symbol of security throughout the West. Every-

one who sees it thinks of Wells Fargo. They don't think of a stagecoach line, an express company—a bank. They think of Wells Fargo . . . security!”

Jim Hardie nodded thoughtfully. “I know, John,” he said. “Wells Fargo has built solidly. . . .”

“We’ve worked too hard and too long to let a few outlaws destroy everything it took us so long to build up,” declared Carter. He banged the strongbox with his fist.

“Nineteen strongboxes, taken in a single month. Two drivers and three shotgun guards killed. . . .”

“A pretty high score for one bunch of road agents,” said Hardie.

Carter said, grimly, “I don’t care how you do it, Jim. Work with the law if you can, but if there isn’t any law in Alder Gulch, make your own law! Teach those road agents a lesson they’ll never forget.”

A few days later, Jim Hardie sat in a jolting stagecoach, headed north. The coach was only a few miles out of Alder Gulch and Hardie was running over things in his mind. Through slitted eyes he observed his fellow passengers, on the stagecoach, a heavyset man in a business suit who had given his name as Walter Bassett. He was on his way to Virginia City to open up a business. He sat across from Hardie and groaned every time the stagecoach hit a deep rut or a rough spot on the road.

Beside him sat the other passenger on the stage, a fat, greasy-looking man, whose eyes could not meet those of his fellow passengers. He had boarded the stagecoach that morning at a stagecoach relay station. His destination, he had told Hardie and Walter Bassett, was Virginia City, “the busiest little place you ever laid eyes on.”

Hardie sent a sideward glance at the fat man beside him. The man would bear watching, he had decided.

A rifle banged outside the stagecoach and immediately the driver began sawing at his reins, trying to pull up the stage.

Across from Jim Hardie, Bassett jerked erect. “Robbers!” he cried, aghast.

Beside Hardie, the fat man began to quiver. “Holdup!” he yelled. “They warned me about road agents. I—I only hope they don’t kill us. . . .”

Hardie, sticking his head out of the stagecoach to look ahead, pulled back. “It’s a holdup, all right,” he announced.

“They’ll take my money,” sobbed Bassett. “It’s all I’ve got

in the world." He brought out a fat wallet, looked around wildly, then thrust it behind the seat cushion.

The stagecoach came to a screeching stop. "All right," roared a huge voice. "Pile out!"

A masked man rode up to the door of the stagecoach and gestured with a revolver. "Out!" he ordered.

Hardie swung open the door and hands half raised, leaped to the ground. He was followed by a trembling Bassett and the fat man. The latter was quaking even more than Bassett, but Hardie was almost certain that the fat one was putting it on.

There were three road agents, a giant man, who seemed to be the leader, another whose forehead, not covered by his handkerchief mask, showed him to be of a swarthy skin. The third man remained mounted, holding the bridle reins of the other road agents' horses.

The giant gestured at the passengers. "Line up!" He seemed incapable of speaking in a normal tone, every word he uttered being roared.

The three passengers lined up beside the stage. The big man came along, thrust his hand into Hardie's right Levi trousers pocket. He came out with a few gold pieces and some silver. He counted it and began to swear loudly.

"Ten, fifteen, damn you for a cheapskate, seventeen dollars and fifteen cents. You got a crust, travelin' with a lousy seventeen dollars. . . ."

"I'm going to the diggings," Hardie replied. "Not coming." He added, cheerfully, "Hope to make my pile in Alder Gulch."

The big man moved on to the fat, quaking man. "All right, mister," he roared. "Let's see your color. And it better be good."

"I ain't got no money," the fat man whined. "Honest, I ain't. . . ."

"What's that?" cried the big man. "Why, you cheap. . . ." He gave the fat man a raking blow across the face with the back of his hand. The fat man reeled back.

"Don't hit me, mister. Please, don't kill me. I'll tell you everything you want to know. Don't kill me. . . ."

The swarthy road agent's eyes fell to the necktie that the fat man was wearing. He grunted and suddenly nudged the giant road agent. The big man grunted. He reached for the fat man and growled:

"All right, what've you got to tell us?"

"Don't kill me," babbled the fat one. "Don't kill me. . . ."

"You holdin' out?" snarled the giant.

"No, no, not me. . . ." The fat man stabbed a forefinger at Walter Bassett. "It's him."

The swarthy man grabbed Bassett with his left hand and with his right raked his face with the muzzle of his revolver. "Out with it!"

"Your poke!" thundered the big man.

"I haven't got any money," Bassett bleated. "Just some small change."

The big man cuffed him with his open hand, a blow so powerful that it sent Bassett to his knees. "Don't gimme that," he thundered. "You look like a banker and you better fork over, or. . . ."

He hit the merchant again.

The swarthy man pointed his revolver at the fat man. "Where's he hiding his money?"

"In the coach," yelled the fat man. "He put it behind the seat cushion."

The swarthy road agent stepped past Bassett and climbed into the coach. He came out in a moment, carrying a fat wallet. The giant road agent took it from him, smacked his lips as he saw the denominations of the bills.

"This is more like it."

"Three thousand dollars," sobbed Bassett, "all the money I've got in the world. . . ."

"Gonna hold out, was you?" snarled the big man. He cuffed the kneeling Bassett again. "You tell the people in Alder Gulch, they try holdin' out, it's gonna be just too bad for them. Understand? You tell them that!"

Hardie said, evenly: "You've got our money. What more do you want?"

"You're talkin' big for a man carries chicken feed," the big man sneered.

"Maybe next time I'll have more. Or a gun."

The big man started to raise his gun on Hardie, but the swarthy man shoved him. "We got what we came for, come on. . . ."

The big man growled, then turned to the horses. He and the swarthy one mounted, then all three of the road agents fired their revolvers in the air and went off, with a rush.

The stagecoach driver, who had remained on his perch, now sprang to the ground and scooped up the revolver he had thrown away, when the road agents had descended upon the coach. He sent two or three bullets whistling after the road agents, but they were already out of effective pistol range.

On the ground, Bassett turned on the fat man. "You had no call to tell them."

The fat man became truculent. "What'd you expect me to do? Get killed, just to save your rotten money?"

"You're wearing a gun," said Bassett.

"So were they," sneered the fat one, "and there was three of them." He whirled on Hardie. "I didn't see you make any move."

"I didn't," said Hardie cheerfully. "He's right, Mr. Bassett. Even if you've got a gun, you don't draw when someone's got the drop on you."

The fat man sneered at Bassett and climbed back into the stagecoach. Bassett, almost blubbing, followed. Hardie was the last to get in.

Virginia City had been built along the bottom of a canyon. Following the lines of least resistance, houses and stores had been erected in an irregular pattern. Actually, Virginia City was only one of several towns along the canyon and creek. Alder Gulch, which included the entire group of towns, was a continual "city," some twelve miles long and a hundred yards wide.

Virginia City, however, was the first of the series of towns at the end of the canyon and it was into this that the stagecoach rolled.

It pulled up in front of a two-story log building, the Virginia City Hotel. A small crowd was waiting as the passengers piled out.

"I've been robbed," bleated Walter Bassett.

"Stage was held up," chimed in the fat man.

Only Hardie and the stagecoach driver made no remarks. Parker the Wells Fargo agent, went up to the driver.

"Same crowd?"

The driver shrugged assent.

The Wells Fargo man shook his head. "They used to rob only stages going from here, now they're stopping the ones coming in."

Sheriff Henry Plummer, a lean, tall man in a fine gray suit and a cream-colored Stetson, pushed through the crowd.

"They get much?" he asked.

The merchant, Bassett, groaned. "Three thousand cash, all the money I had with me."

"You still got some money, though?"

"A Wells Fargo draft, that's all. I'd intended to set up in business here, but now. . . ."

"It's too bad, mister," Plummer sympathized. "We've had a few holdups here, but. . . ."

"A few!" snorted Parker, the Wells Fargo agent.

The sheriff turned on him. "I can't police the whole territory of Montana with two deputies."

Hardie said: "You the sheriff?"

"That's right." Plummer looked sharply at Hardie. "You were on the stage?"

"Yep."

"Lose much?"

"A little," said Hardie. "Just chicken feed."

He turned away and headed for a nearby saloon. Plummer's eyes followed Hardie, but Bassett caught the sheriff's coat lapels and continued his harangue.

There were three men at the bar when Hardie entered, a giant ruffian, a swarthy man and a redheaded, unshaven man. Hardie gave them a careless glance as he stepped up to the bar.

"A short one," he told the bartender.

The bartender drew a small beer and set it before Hardie. Hardie picked it up, saluted the three men along the bar and quaffed the cooling liquid. The three men exchanged looks.

"Just get in?" asked the swarthy man.

"Yep," said Hardie, cheerfully. "I hope to make my pile here."

"That's twenty-five cents," the bartender said to Hardie.

"For a short beer?"

"That beer come two thousand miles."

"Almost as far as I came." He reached down and pulled up his right trousers leg. He slipped two fingers down the top of his boot and brought out a sheaf of greenbacks, folded lengthwise.

"A little something the road agents overlooked," he said, cheerfully.

The men along the bar exchanged looks of consternation. Hardie skimmed off one of the bills and dropped it on the bar. "Give my friends a drink," he said to the bartender. "They look like they've been riding pretty hard today."

The giant growled. "We been here all morning." He scowled at the bartender. "Ain't we?"

The bartender winced. "Yes sir. Right here."

Hardie nodded, set down his glass and left the saloon. Outside, he walked past two buildings until he reached the

Wells Fargo office. Angry voices came out, but Hardie entered.

Parker, the agent, was behind a counter, facing Sheriff Plummer. Plummer was saying: "A man can only do so much."

"You got plenty of time to drink and play cards in the saloons," the Wells Fargo man retorted.

The sheriff showed sudden anger. "Look here, Parker, I've been hearing some talk about you, you and Sanders and that blasted butcher Biedler. You're stirring up the people and I don't like it. I don't like it one bit."

"Neither do we," declared Parker. "We don't like what's going on in Alder Gulch."

"Like it or not," snapped Plummer, "there'll be no Vigilantes here. Not as long as I'm sheriff."

"That may not be as long as you think!"

Plummer became aware suddenly of Hardie, whirled and went out of the express office. Hardie waited until the door had slammed, then faced Parker.

"Jim Hardie, special agent," he said, then.

Parker's mouth fell open in astonishment. "Hardie? You were on the stagecoach. . . ."

"A very nice operation," said Hardie. "The boys know their trade."

"They've had enough experience," Parker said, bitterly. "Three out of every five stages that leave here are held up."

"Why not every one?"

"Because they know which to hold up. That's certain. I've sent out strongboxes filled with rocks. They never rob them—only the ones with the dust, or when there are passengers coming into town with fat wallets."

"We stopped at a station last night," said Hardie, "run by a man named Bunton."

"He's one of them, I'm sure."

"Why not change station agents, then?"

"The man you'd give it to would probably be one of them," Parker groaned. "Hardie, I've been a Wells Fargo agent for twenty years. I started with the company in Tuolumne and I've had offices in Arizona, California, Washington Territory and Idaho, some pretty rough camps, but nothing like Virginia City. Do you know how many murders have been committed in Alder Gulch in the last three months?"

"A half dozen," guessed Hardie. "Ten?"

"One hundred and two!" cried Parker. "One hundred

and two that we know about—and maybe twice that number we don't know about. Miners have been shot, stabbed, their bodies dragged into brush, thrown into holes. We've had forty-eight stagecoach holdups and the good lord knows how many freighters and travelers have been robbed. I sometimes think half of the people in Montana are living by robbing the other half."

"The road agents are a pretty large crowd," conceded Hardie. "I've already gathered that, but how well are they organized?"

"That's what I don't know," said Parker. "My suspicion is, plenty well. One large, very strong outfit with a single leader. That they've got spies everywhere we all know. I've had stagecoaches come in with chalk marks on them. I've tried every trick I've been able to figure out and not one of them has worked a good goshdarn."

"Weren't you having words with the sheriff when I came in?"

Parker nodded glumly. "He's a friend of every ruffian in the gulch. He's plenty smooth, but I happen to know that he was a gambler before he came here. Killed his man over in Idaho."

"Some pretty respectable people have been gamblers. Still are."

"Plummer looks respectable," said Parker in disgust. "He talks respectable but when the Vigilantes get organized. . . ."

"Vigilantes?"

Parker was discomfited. "We've got a judge here—a judge in name. We've had jury trials. One man was convicted and two of the jurors were killed, so that was the end of that. The sheriff hasn't arrested a man in three weeks, except old Bill Fairweather the town drunk, and he doesn't count."

Hardie examined the luggage from the stagecoach that had been brought into the office. He found his carpetbag and picked it up.

"I'd better not stay here too long," he told Parker.

"Get a room at the hotel and I'll come up and we'll have a talk."

Hardie left the express office and went to the hotel. He got a room, paying five dollars in advance, for a night's lodging.

Going to the room he opened his carpetbag and took from it a cartridge belt and holster and a well-oiled revolver. He buckled the belt about his waist.

Then he rummaged about in the carpetbag and found a

necktie. Stepping to a cracked mirror he put it about his throat and tied a knot. He was dissatisfied with it and loosening it, tied it again. He looked at it then, thoughtfully.

The fat man on the stagecoach had worn a necktie, in spite of his unkempt clothing. The tie had been tied with a peculiar square knot, like the one Hardie had now tied in his own necktie. The three men in the saloon, the giant, the swarthy man and the redhead had all worn neckties, tied thus.

Leaving his room, Hardie descended to the lobby and stepped out upon the street. He looked off to the left, then nodding to himself, walked to the saloon.

The three men were still at the bar. Some change lay on the bar in front of the giant. Hardie walked up, picked up a silver dollar and tossed it into the air. He caught it and covered the open palm with his other hand.

"Call it," he said, "double or nothing."

The big man blinked. "That's my money you're getting free with."

"You owe me seventeen dollars," said Hardie coolly. "I won't count the small change. One call, thirty-four dollars or nothing."

The big man's huge hand lunged for Hardie, but the latter stepped back, out of range.

"Gimme that!" the giant roared, in the same voice as the roaring voice of the stagecoach holdup leader.

"Make me," challenged Hardie.

The big man stopped. A wicked grin came over his features. "Well, well, the little man wants to fight."

"You name it, mister!"

The swarthy man moved forward. "Wait a minute, Boone," he said. He pointed quickly in the general direction of Hardie's necktie, but the giant, Boone Helm, brushed his pointing hand aside.

"I ain't licked me a man all day," Helm said, "and this fella's been askin' for it."

"Boone!" the swarthy man said, sharply. "The necktie. . ."

Boone Helm's eyes came to focus on the necktie Hardie was wearing. He took it in, but still shook his head. "All right, he still asked for it."

The red-haired man tried to step between Helm and Hardie, but it was Hardie now who moved sideways, to face Helm. "He's big," Hardie said, "but you know what they say about the big ones . . . clumsy . . . all muscle . . . no brains."

Helm let out a roar and threw himself at Hardie. Hardie sidestepped and smashed Helm on the side of his head and pivoting back, sank his left into Helm's side. Helm was knocked off balance, but recovering, came at Hardie again. Hardie feinted and as Helm threw up his guard, sank his fist into the big man's stomach. Helm gasped, lowered his guard and Hardie hit him in the face, a hard, jolting blow.

Helm went back against the bar, recoiled from it. His arm went up instinctively and he took Hardie's punch on it. Then he lashed out at Hardie. The latter went back, crashed over a table and, rolling free, scrambled to his feet, narrowly missing a kick launched at him by Helm. He caught the big man with a hard right.

Sheriff Plummer came rushing from the door.

"Stop it, you two," he cried. He shoved Hardie aside and caught Helm's swinging arm. "Boone, stop it."

Helm struggled to get clear of the sheriff. "Lemme at him," he said, thickly. "Lemme go and I'll rip him to pieces."

Plummer whipped out his revolver and slammed the muzzle into Helm's stomach. "Not now, Helm," he said, savagely.

A shudder ran through Helm. He blinked at Plummer, then found Hardie and fixed him with a baleful glare. "I ain't through with you yet." But he allowed himself to be led out by the sheriff.

The swarthy man shook his head at Hardie. "You pick a funny way to introduce yourself. That was Boone Helm you were fighting."

"Helm's somebody?" Hardie asked, thinly.

"He'd cut your throat and have his supper right afterwards." He grunted. "They call me Cherokee Bob. This is Red Yager."

"Come on, fellows," Red Yager said in a low tone. "The boss gave me the signal."

"What's up?" Hardie asked.

"A meeting." He started for the door. Cherokee Bob looked inquiringly at Hardie. Hardie nodded and started to follow Red Yager. Cherokee Bob fell in behind him.

The shack was at the edge of town. A number of horses were tied to trees and bushes nearby and as Hardie, Cherokee Bob and Red Yager came up, a man carrying a rifle, looked them over carefully. His eyes, Hardie noted, took in the square-knotted neckties. Evidently they all passed muster for they were allowed to enter the cabin.

Inside the cabin were more than twenty men, every man

of them a ruffian. The fat man from the stagecoach was in the room, as was Boone Helm.

The fat man recognized Hardie. "You, too?"

"A man's got to make a living," Hardie replied.

Boone Helm pushed his way closer to Hardie. "You and me's got some unfinished business."

"Any time."

A stir ran through the crowd. A door opened at the rear of the shack and Sheriff Plummer came in. He was wearing a black mask that covered his entire face, but it was apparent to Hardie, at least, who he was, since he had not bothered to change his clothes. He stood with his back against the door and waited for the crowd of ruffians to become quiet.

"I won't waste time," Plummer said, then. "We're in trouble."

A murmur ran through the road agents.

"Colonel Sanders, Biedler and that damn' Wells Fargo agent, Parker, are forming a Vigilante committee," Plummer went on. He raised his hand for silence as another murmur went up. "We're not licked. Not by a long shot. I'm not afraid of Sanders, Biedler and the whole kit and kaboodle of them. We've come through some tight places and we'll come through this. Just remember—we've got an organization and they're just starting one. And they don't know us. But we know them." He chuckled grimly. "Me, I'm one of their bunch. I holler about hanging road agents as loud as they do."

"Hanging?" cried the fat road agent. "They figure to hang us?"

"The rope isn't in Montana that'll hang me, Fat Jack!" cried Plummer.

A roar went up.

"They're a bunch of chicken-livered amateurs," Plummer went on, warmly. "What we're going to do, is put the fear of the devil into them. We'll take their leaders first, Sanders, Biedler, Parker . . . shoot them down right out in the street and let the rest of them see what dead men look like." He paused, then said, fiercely, "Twelve o'clock tomorrow. That's when we hit. Noon." He pointed at a road agent. "Billings, you and Moffatt ride over to Bannack and get Gallagher and his boys over here." He pointed at another man. "You, whatever your name is, get a fast horse and ride over to Deer Lodge. Tell Felser to have his crowd here by eleven o'clock." He pointed at the swarthy Cherokee Bob.

"Bob, take a couple of men and ride over to Bunton's. Bring back those horses he's been keeping."

"Right!" said Cherokee Bob. He tapped Red Yager on the shoulder. "Red, you come along." His eyes met those of Hardie. He hesitated, then nodded. "You, too."

Hardie followed the others out of the shack. Outside, Hardie said to Cherokee Bob, "Bunton's the lad runs the Wells Fargo relay station, isn't he?"

"Yep."

"That's fifteen, eighteen miles. Kind of far for walking, wouldn't you say?"

"Who said anything about walking?"

"I came in on the stage—remember? I haven't got a horse."

Cherokee Bob chuckled. "So you recognized us, eh?" He pointed to the horses tethered here and there. "Horses is something we don't bother about. We don't care who owns which." He winked at Hardie. "The brands are good, too. Here. Maybe not so good in Idaho or Washington, but in Montana they're fine."

A half hour later, Hardie and the two road agents were traveling along the road over which the stagecoach had come earlier that day. They were approaching a narrow defile between two cliffs, when Hardie allowed his horse to lag behind the others. He suddenly kicked the horse's belly.

The animal reared up. Hardie jerked hard on the reins and the animal shied and began to dance about. "Whoa there, you damn' mountain goat," cried Hardie.

Cherokee Bob and Red Yager pulled up their horses. Yager rode back to Hardie. "Come on, it'll be dark in a half hour."

Hardie brought the horse under control, then dismounted. He grabbed the right front leg of the horse and raised the hoof. "Shoe's loose," he told Yager.

"Fine time," said the road agent. He reached into his saddlebag. "I got a hammer here." He brought it out and extended it to Hardie.

Hardie caught hold of the hammer, jerked on it. Yager released his grip on the hammer, but Hardie, letting it fall, grabbed for the road agent's wrist. He got it and pulled Yager from the saddle. Hardie went for his revolver, but the road agent, hitting the ground on his side, rolled over and upset Hardie.

Hardie fell sideways. He started to get up and saw the revolver in Yager's fist. Hardie whipped up his own gun, let himself fall backwards and fire. He saw blood spurt from

Yager's face, came up to his knees and saw Cherokee Bob, astride his horse, charging down on him.

Hardie fired a second time and Cherokee Bob tumbled from the saddle. Hardie got to his feet, walked over to Cherokee Bob and looked down at the swarthy outlaw. He shook his head and walked back to Red Yager. He, too, was dead.

Parker was seated at his roll-top desk, when a discreet knock sounded on the alley door. He got up, drew his revolver and stepped to the door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Hardie," came the careful reply.

Parker exclaimed and shot back the bolt on the door. Hardie did not enter, however. "Better step out here."

Parker sent a look over his shoulder at the front door, then moved out into the alley. "Take me to Colonel Sanders," Hardie said, earnestly. "Or Biedler."

"Sanders! Biedler!" exclaimed Parker. "What do you know about them?"

"I know that the three of you are forming a Vigilante committee," said Hardie. "I also know that you'll be dead men at noon tomorrow, unless you all listen to me."

It was five minutes to eleven the following day, when Jim Hardie stepped out of the hotel and moved to the edge of the wooden sidewalk in front of Sheriff Plummer's office.

A man rode up, peered at Hardie's throat, then rode on a few yards and, dismounting, tied his horse to the hitchrail.

Parker appeared in the doorway of the Wells Fargo office, saw Hardie and went inside. Biedler, a heavysset man wearing a stained butcher's apron, came across the street, gave Hardie a covert glance and went into the Wells Fargo office.

Sheriff Plummer appeared in the doorway of his office. He saw Hardie and came out.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped. "It's too early."

"It's just about eleven," said Hardie.

"The time's twelve, you fool," exclaimed Plummer.

"You won't be alive by twelve," Hardie said, calmly.

"What?" cried Plummer.

Hardie's eyes went past Plummer, toward the express office. Parker, Biedler and Colonel Sanders had come out and were approaching. Colonel Sanders, a stern-faced man wearing a black Prince Albert, was carrying a rifle. Parker had a short shotgun and the butcher gripped an old-fashioned Dragoon pistol. Plummer, following Hardie's look, turned.

"You know Mr. Parker," Hardie said, "Colonel Sanders and Mr. Biedler."

Shock slackened Plummer's features for a moment, but he regained his composure almost immediately. "Gentlemen," he said, with forced good humor. "You look like you're going hunting."

"We are," said Colonel Sanders, grimly.

"And you're the game," added Biedler.

Plummer's forced good humor disappeared again. "Now, wait a minute, Biedler!"

"We won't bandy words," said Colonel Sanders. "You're under arrest."

"You're carrying this too far," blustered the sheriff. His right hand made a sudden downward move. Hardie, just three feet from him, shot out his left hand and gripped the sheriff's wrist. With his right hand, Hardie whipped out his own revolver.

"Easy, Sheriff!" he warned.

He whisked the sheriff's gun from his holster and thrust it behind the waistband of his trousers. Three men, armed with rifles, converged upon the group. Colonel Sanders nodded toward Plummer.

"Watch him."

He turned and started for the saloon. Biedler and Hardie followed.

Boone Helm stood at the bar in the saloon. Three men were playing cards at one of the tables. The batwing doors swung open and Colonel Sanders, Biedler, Parker and Hardie entered.

Helm scowled at them. "That butcher shop," he said to Biedler, "sure gives off some smells." He wrinkled his nose and signaled to the bartender. "You ought to keep people like that out of here."

"You're under arrest, Helm," Biedler said, coldly.

"You take over Henry Plummer's badge?" Helm sneered.

"Plummer's under arrest," Hardie said. "Make no mistake now, Helm. The game's up. . . ."

Helm regarded Hardie with distaste. "I didn't like you when I first set eyes on you."

"When was that, Helm?" Hardie taunted. "When you held up the stage?"

"I said, we had some unfinished business. . . ." Helm took a step forward, but Colonel Sanders brought up the muzzle of his rifle.

"Helm!" he snapped.

Helm stopped, but kept his eyes on Hardie.

"I'm waiting," Hardie said, softly.

Boone Helm's face twisted in sudden rage. His hand went for his gun. He was clumsy, awkward, but Hardie waited until the muzzle of the road agent's gun had cleared leather. Then he went for his own gun.

It came up smoothly, swiftly. It spouted thunder and flame. The gun fell from Boone Helm's hand and he reeled back, his left hand clawing at his right arm.

Hardie, followed by Biedler, walked past Helm toward the card players. He pointed at the first man. "You're under arrest."

The second man wore no necktie. Hardie said, "You're all right. But you're not," he pointed at the third man.

"Just like I said all the time," declared Biedler. "There's so many they didn't even know each other."

"They had to have some means of identification," said Hardie. "That square-tied necktie was Plummer's way of letting each other know who was a member of the gang."

On the street, a crowd of armed men had gathered around Plummer. Another group herded two men along, from across the street. They met in front of the sheriff's office, as Hardie and the others brought up Boone Helm and the two men from the saloon.

"Well, well," Helm said to Plummer. "They got you first."

"Keep your mouth shut!" snarled Plummer.

"It's too late for that," said Colonel Sanders. "We know you're their leader."

"You can't prove it," said Plummer, doggedly. "Take me before your court and see if I don't make fools of the lot of you."

"Court?" asked Sanders. "What court?"

His eyes went to a man carrying three coils of rope. Plummer saw the ropes and reacted violently. "You wouldn't dare!" he gasped. "You wouldn't. . . ."

"We're wasting time," said Biedler.

"No, no!" cried Plummer, in panic. "You've got to give me time. . . ."

"Until twelve o'clock?" asked Hardie.

"An hour," pleaded Plummer. "Give me an hour."

"We'll give you as much time as you and your killers gave the one hundred and two men you murdered in Alder Gulch during the last three months," Biedler said, bleakly.

A clatter of hoofs on the street attracted the attention of the group. A dozen horsemen came along the street. Fat Jack, Hardie noted, was one of them. A look of sudden hope came

to Sheriff Plummer's eyes. The horsemen stopped in the middle of the street, opposite the Vigilantes and their prisoners.

"We'll proceed," said Biedler, loudly.

"You wouldn't dare," cried Plummer.

Hardie raised his revolver into the air and fired once. Two riflemen appeared on the roof of the sheriff's office. Three men stepped to the edge of the roof of the hotel. Across the street, two men appeared on top of the butcher shop. Several more moved out of stores, on both sides of the street.

The road agents in the middle of the street, milled around. None drew guns.

"Throw down your guns!" Hardie cried, in a ringing voice.

There was a moment of hesitation, then a gun was thrown to the street. It was the signal for the other road agents, to disarm. Guns clattered on the hard earth.

"We'll proceed," Biedler, the butcher of Virginia City, said once more.

Sam Bass

FROM DEADWOOD, Dakota Territory, Sam Bass wrote to a friend in Denton, Texas: "I've got the world by the tail with a downhill pull." He was a happy man. He and Joel Collins had driven a small herd to Nebraska (a herd which they did not own), had sold it for eight thousand dollars and moved northward to the diggings that had been recently discovered in the Black Hills.

Most prospectors reach a gold strike, broke, make their pile and leave with money. Collins and Bass reversed the procedure. They arrived in Deadwood, rich, left it broke. Most of the eight thousand went in the gambling halls; what was left went for whisky and girls. Some of it was squandered on food.

Joel and Sam took to stagecoach robbery. Sometimes they netted anywhere between eight to twenty dollars per holdup. On one job, they actually lost three dollars. The take was four dollars, but there were seven passengers and one of

them complaining he would have no money to buy breakfast, the soft-hearted Sam gave him a dollar. Whereupon the others also clamored and the road agents wound up staking the passengers to a breakfast apiece.

Joel and Sam found a few boys with ideas similar to their own and leaving Deadwood, traveled down to Nebraska. Jesse James, they read in the newspapers, was making a fine living robbing trains. Why not Joel, Sam and the boys?

They held up the Union Pacific at Big Springs, Nebraska. They forced the Wells Fargo messenger to open his safe and found a few hundred dollars. In a fit of rage, Collins caught up an axe and swung it upon a stack of wooden boxes piled up near the safe. A board splintered and gold coins spewed out.

Sixty thousand dollars in double eagles. Ten thousand for each member of the gang.

The boys were aghast at their good fortune, but they realized, too, that sixty thousand dollars was a sizable haul and that the express company would move heaven and earth to recover it.

The boys scattered. One went to Missouri and was killed, Joel Collins and another met their fate in Kansas. Sam Bass and the others, traveled to Texas.

They spent the double eagles freely and soon they had to hold up a few trains. The loot was never very much, but they made expenses. They also made the Texas Rangers very angry.

They pulled a job and headed for the canebrakes. Sam and his friends knew the brakes better than the rabbits who infested it. The Rangers became lost in it.

Sam Bass wrote letters to the newspapers, taunting the Texas Rangers. He boasted of his past exploits. He never quite came out and claimed credit for the big Nebraska job, but he hinted at things he had done up north.

And, one day, Jim Hardie rode into Denton, Texas, and stopped off at the office of the Texas Rangers. The dour leader of the Rangers, one Captain McNelly, complained bitterly: "Every time we get close to him, he heads for the canebrakes. It's like a madhouse, you go around in circles. You don't know where you are. But Sam Bass and his boys know every rabbit trail. And they laugh at us. Right out loud. You know what that can do to a man?"

"Make him pretty mad," said Hardie.

"That isn't the worst of it! It's those letters he writes to the newspapers, taunting us."

"A downright menace," said Hardie, trying to conceal a grin. "Guess we're going to have to get him."

McNelly scowled at Hardie. "I've come to the conclusion the only way Sam Bass'll ever be caught is if somebody on the inside co-operates with us. One of the gang, for instance, in hopes of getting immunity, or collecting the reward money."

"Captain," said Hardie, "I've been thinking along those same lines.

That afternoon, Hardie entered a feed store just a few doors from the Texas Ranger office. He drew his revolver and covered the feed man.

"I'll take what you've got in the till," he said.

The feed man opened his cash drawer. Then his eyes went past Hardie, through the window, into the street. A wide grin split his face. "You're done for, mister!" he chortled.

Hardie sent a quick glance over his shoulder.

"Rangers!" cried the feed man.

Hardie waited for no more. He sheathed his revolver, bounced out of the feed store and headed for his horse. He was swinging into the saddle, when the feed man hit the street.

"Stop thief!" bawled the feed man. "Stop him!"

Captain McNelly and the two Texas Rangers had just passed the feed store. They whirled their horses and saw Jim Hardie, galloping away. The Rangers drew revolvers and opened fire. Their aim was bad and the bullets went wild.

It was only when Hardie made a right turn into a side street that the Rangers put spurs to their horses and took after him.

They were a hundred yards behind Hardie when Hardie left the last house of Denton behind him. The distance between the two—Hardie and the Rangers—did not lessen in the next mile of riding. Then, Hardie drew away from the Rangers.

The Rangers kept on, however. Another mile, two. The canebrakes were ahead. The Rangers suddenly drew up their horses and resorted to shooting.

Hardie disappeared into the canebrakes. The Rangers advanced again, but reaching the edge of the brakes, merely fired into them a few times.

In the brakes, Hardie pulled up his horse. He continued

on for a few hundred yards, following a faint trail, then drew up his horse and dismounted. He rested the tired horse a few minutes, then leading it, continued on into the cane-brakes.

An ugly-faced man in his thirties stepped out from a clump of brush and stood in the way of Hardie.

"What you doin' here?" the ugly one demanded.

"Looking for a hole," replied Hardie. "What would you do, bunch of people trying to shoot you?"

Another man, this one a mere youth of about nineteen, stepped out from behind the brush. He said: "Those were Rangers shooting at you."

"Were they?" said Hardie, indifferently.

"Who told you to head this way?" demanded the older man.

"Closest place."

"Think we believe that?" demanded the ugly one. "Those Rangers are just desperate enough to try anything . . . any kind of trick."

"Trick?" asked Hardie. Then he chuckled. "Hey, you think I'm a Ranger. I been called a lot of things in my time, but never that."

"I don't buy it," the older man said, nastily. "All right, you rode in here, you can ride out again."

"Uh uh," said Hardie. "Those lads were shooting a little too close to suit me. I'm staying right here."

The older one of the two brought his right hand out from behind his back. It held a revolver.

"I'm going to count to three. If you ain't. . . ."

"No, Murphy," exclaimed the youth. "Let Mr. Bass decide what to do with him."

Hardie showed surprise. "Sam Bass?"

"Don't act so surprised," snarled the man called Murphy. "Everybody in Texas knows he's holed up in here."

"I've been down in Mexico," said Hardie. He grinned. "For my health. Some people wanted to put a rope around my neck. It would have interfered with my breathing."

"You talk fancy," scowled Murphy.

"Just like Mr. Bass," said the young man admiringly. "I think him and Mr. Bass'll get along."

Murphy thought that over, then decided to follow the boy's suggestion. "Start moving," he ordered Hardie. "And you, Jackson, keep your eyes peeled."

Murphy and Jackson led Hardie along trails for a half hour or more. After two minutes Hardie was utterly and com-

pletely lost. The trails crisscrossed one another, sometimes turned to the right, to the left. He had a vague feeling that the two men were purposely leading him in a circle, to confuse him.

At length they came to a cave, the mouth of which was half concealed by brush. When they rounded the brush, Hardie saw a smiling, strikingly handsome man of about twenty-eight, standing in the doorway of the cave.

"We picked up a package," growled Murphy.

"Mr. Bass, I presume," said Hardie. He sized up the man before him. "I figured you for about eight feet tall."

"Hey, not bad," said Sam Bass, cheerfully. "Go ahead, let's hear your story, and make it good."

"I wouldn't believe him if he read from a Gideon Bible," said Murphy.

"Who are you?" Bass asked Hardie.

"Name's Hardie. Jim Hardie."

"I'm supposed to have heard of you?"

"Nope. I've been away."

"Says he's been in Mexico," Murphy offered.

"Why?" Bass asked.

"Got in a gunfight in Laredo, a couple of years ago."

"Mexico's not a bad place," said Bass. "Why'd you come back?"

"Ran out of money. I was trying to get some in Denton, when the Rangers rode by."

"You believe that, Sam?" demanded Murphy, skeptically.

"I'm just an Indiana farm boy," said Sam Bass, easily. "I believe everybody . . . until I find out otherwise."

"Well, I don't believe him," snapped Murphy. "Especially him."

Hardie exhaled heavily. "Murphy, if you want trouble, I'll give it to you, any way you name . . . guns, knives, fists or anything else you can think of."

The gun in Murphy's hand came up, but Sam Bass slapped it aside. "We could use a little fun around here. Go ahead, fight."

"Mr. Bass," said young Jackson. "Let's not fight against one another."

"One another? He isn't one of us." Bass smiled pleasantly at Murphy. "Go ahead, take him."

Murphy realized that his chief was giving him an order. He holstered his revolver, unbuckled his gunbelt and let it drop to the ground. Hardie held up a hand.

"I'd like to make a condition," he said.

"I thought so," said Bass, cheerfully. "You'd like to use an ax?"

"I've been riding two days and nights. I'm a little dead from sleep. After I take him, would it be all right if I grabbed myself a catnap?"

"You take him and you can have as long a nap as you want, and a fine dinner to boot. But if you don't. . . ." The smile faded from his handsome face.

Hardie nodded. He stepped forward, feinted and when Murphy's guard went up, sent a smashing blow into the outlaw's midriff. Murphy gasped, folded forward. Hardie followed through with a terrific blow to the jaw and Murphy went down. He retained consciousness, but there was no more fight in him.

Sam Bass said, "You can take your nap, now." He smiled brightly, turned and led the way into the cave. Hardie followed.

Hardie's eyes opened and stared for a moment at flickering flames, before he recalled where he was. In Sam Bass's hide-out, a cave deep in the canebrakes.

The odor of coffee assailed his nostrils and he was about to sit up, when his eyes fell upon an object on the floor of the cave, only inches from him.

A revolver.

He stared at it, then his eyes went again to the fire. Sam Bass was beyond it. He was crouched over, eating lustily from a tin plate. Beside him was the outlaw, Murphy. On the near side of the fire, his back turned to Hardie, crouched the young outlaw, Jackson.

Hardie's eyes fell again on the revolver. He could scoop it up, get the drop on the three men by the fire. It would be all over. He raised his hand, started to reach for the revolver, then stopped. He sat up, picked up the gun carelessly and called: "Hey, Jackson, this thing belong to you?"

The young outlaw turned and Hardie flipped the gun to him. Jackson caught it, his face registering chagrin. Hardie climbed to his feet, yawned and stretched himself.

"I could use some of that grub."

"Bet you could," Sam Bass said, cheerfully. "Anything special you'd like?"

"Well, maybe some. . . ." Hardie began, then caught himself and grinned.

Sam Bass chuckled. "Guess you're tired of those Mexican frijoles, hey?"

"For a minute I forgot I'm an unwelcome guest," Hardie said, ruefully.

"First guest we ever had," said Sam Bass. "Welcome or unwelcome. If we're not quite up on our company manners, I hope you'll overlook it."

"To me, it isn't funny," said Hardie.

"Everything's funny, Hardie," said Sam Bass. "Just depends on the way you look at it." He made a gesture with his hand. "All right, Seaborn, you can come out."

A heavyset, mustachioed man carrying a gun in his hand, came from the shadows behind Jim Hardie. Hardie knew then that he had almost made the mistake of his life. If he had scooped up the gun and tried to get the drop on Bass and the two men ahead of him . . . well, it was the last mistake Jim Hardie would ever have made.

"You passed the test, boy," said Sam Bass. "Seaborn, meet Jim Hardie. Claims he's a bankrupt outlaw."

Hardie and Seaborn Barnes exchanged short nods.

"I don't believe him," Murphy said, flatly.

"Murphy's nervous by nature," Sam Bass said to Hardie.

"Maybe he's yellow by nature," Hardie replied.

Murphy sprang to his feet. "Nobody talks to me like that," he cried, furiously. His hand started toward his hip, but stopped as Sam Bass snapped, "No, Murphy. Behave yourself."

For an instant it seemed as if Murphy would defy the outlaw but then Seaborn Barnes said, quietly, "A bankrupt outlaw, eh?"

"That's about it," agreed Hardie.

Sam Bass declared: "We've been bankrupt ourselves. Why, back in Dakota when I was first starting out, I stopped about eight stages, for a grand total of about sixty dollars. Hardly enough to pay for the cartridges I used up. Not that I ever really killed a man."

"Made some of them wish they was dead, though," suggested young Jackson.

"The holdup business ain't really what it's cracked up to be," Bass went on, philosophically. "You pull a bunch of jobs and you get peanuts. It's the big one you hit once in awhile that keeps you going."

"Like the Union Pacific job, in Nebraska," Hardie said. "Got sixty thousand from Wells Fargo on that one, didn't you?"

A sudden hush fell upon the group. Then Murphy snapped: "Wasn't our job."

"Uh uh," said Sam Bass, shaking his head. "A man does

good work, he's entitled to the credit. It was us, all right. Still got some of that gold coin left."

"You talk too much, Sam!" snarled Murphy.

"I like to talk."

"Maybe you're satisfied with him," Murphy snapped, jabbing his thumb in Hardie's direction, "but I ain't. He could be a Wells Fargo man."

"Are you a Wells Fargo man, Jim?" Bass asked, cheerfully.

"Do I look like one?" Hardie asked.

Bass turned to Murphy. "See? He says he ain't a Wells Fargo man."

"You trust everybody!"

"Why not? It's a short life. Live and let live. We get along all right."

Seaborn Barnes said, "We've had it pretty good lately."

"I don't think things could be any better," agreed Bass. "I do my job as well as I can. If you ask me, I'd say I've got the world by the tail with a downhill pull." He shrugged. "The way I look at it, people work at different things. I work at being an outlaw. The hours are good, the work isn't too hard and the pay's adequate."

"So they tell me," said Hardie. "Wouldn't mind throwing in with you."

Sam Bass hesitated, his eyes going across the fire to young Jackson. "Four men are enough. That is, four grown men."

Young Jackson sprang to his feet. "Don't start that again!"

"You're too young to be on the wrong side of the law, Jackson," Sam Bass said, serious at last. "I've tried to tell you a hundred times."

"I've heard it until it's coming out of my ears," cried Jackson.

Hardie said, "I don't want to make any trouble between you two. . . ."

Bass appealed to Hardie. "I'll leave it to you, Jim. He's got his whole life in front of him. He can live it good, find himself a pretty wife, be respectable, work at a job. Or, he can live it in a canebrake, hiding, hunted. . . ."

"He's right," Hardie said to Jackson.

"It's all good enough for us," Bass went on. "We're older. We can even be happy this way. There are things we can laugh at, and things we can remember from the dim past. . . ." He got up and came around the fire. Looking down at Jackson, he said, somberly: "But you don't have any past to remember. All I say is, live as an honest, law-abiding man for a couple of

years, then if you don't like it, make your choice what you want to be—a bank robber or a bank president.”

Jackson got up, turned his back on Sam Bass.

Hardie said, quietly: “Makes a lot of sense, Jackson.”

“Anxious to take my place, aren't you?” Jackson snapped, but there was a catch in his voice.

“Maybe I am, son,” said Hardie.

“Let me put it this way,” Bass said. “If you turned out to be a farmer, a rancher, even a dirty low-down sheriff, it'd make me feel like I'd done something good to make up for some of the bad. It'd make me proud.”

The boy was no longer making any attempt to control himself. Sobs, wracking his slight body, he blubbered. “You really mean that, Mr. Bass. I can tell that you do.”

Sam Bass dropped a heavy hand on Jackson's shoulder. “So, what do you say to it?”

“I say thank you, sir. You . . . you're the greatest man I've ever known, Mr. Bass.”

“You stick around with us until tomorrow night,” Bass went on. “I want you out of this country by the twenty-fifth, that's three days from now.”

“The twenty-fifth?” asked Hardie. “Any reason for that particular date?”

“There's a shipment of gold due in Round Rock on the twenty-fifth,” said Sam Bass. “We'll ride in tomorrow to do a little shopping and sort of look things over. You come along with us.”

“Fine,” said Hardie.

“And don't forget,” Murphy said, balefully. “Some of us will be keeping an eye on you, every minute.”

Round Rock was a mean little town of a single street, containing fifteen or twenty stores, a railroad depot and a few thousand jackrabbits in and about the town, which kept down the grass so that cattle found the grazing pretty sparse.

Sam Bass, Seaborn Barnes, Murphy and Jim Hardie rode carelessly into the town and dismounted near a feed store. “Need a couple of sacks of grain,” Bass said.

“I need about two stiff drinks of whisky,” Barnes announced.

“Two,” agreed Bass, “No more.”

He looked at Murphy. “Go with him, Murphy.”

Bass turned to Hardie. “Don't get lost. We leave town in a half hour.”

Hardie nodded and stood for a moment on the sidewalk, surveying the town. A general store across the street caught his eye and he went over. He entered the store and his eyes lighted up as he saw the little compartment at the rear of the store, with a board over it, on which was lettered: **POST OFFICE.**

Two minutes later, Murphy and Sam Bass entered the store. They walked quietly to the rear, where Hardie was standing by the post-office window. Hardie, writing on a slip of paper, looked over his shoulder.

"What's that you're writing, Jim?" Bass asked.

"Money order."

"Thought you didn't have any money?"

Hardie pulled some bills and small change from a pocket. "Seven dollars and twenty-five cents . . . and a quarter for the money order and stamp. I was saving it for a grubstake, but I figure she needs it more'n me."

"She?" Murphy said.

"My mother."

Bass reached in front of Hardie and picked up the money order blank. "Mrs. Pete Hardie," he read, "Denton, Texas. Pay the amount of seven dollars and twenty-five cents." He looked thoughtfully at Hardie. "She lives right close."

"Why do you think I headed for this part of the country?" Hardie asked. "It was so I could see her."

Sam Bass smiled finally. "Go ahead, Jim, send her the money. Man ought to be good to his mother. If mine hadn't died when I was just a pup, I might be an honest man today." He grimaced. "Honest and dull."

Bass and Murphy walked out of the store and Hardie finished his transaction with a very nervous storekeeper-postmaster.

When he paid for the money order, Hardie walked quickly out of the store and across the street, where Bass, Barnes and Murphy were mounting their horses.

The telegraph operator at Denton walked into Ranger headquarters, shaking his head. He carried a telegram blank.

"You know anybody named Mrs. Pete Hardie?" the telegraph operator asked.

Captain McNelly snatched the telegram from the operator. "This is it," he cried.

"It's only a money order and not even a big one," said the operator.

"It's big enough for me."

"I don't get it," the operator said. "You told me to bring all the telegraphs to you that I couldn't understand, but that there thing—"

"Don't try to figure it out, Gage."

"Who is Mrs. Pete Hardie? No one by that name around here."

"Mrs. Hardie is a sweet little old lady named Captain McNelly," chuckled one of the Rangers.

"Gage," said McNelly irascibly. "Let it drop. Don't think about it."

The telegraph operator left the office, shaking his head. The moment the door was closed, McNelly exclaimed, "Seven, twenty-five, the seventh month, the twenty-fifth day. . . ."

"Tomorrow," cried one of the Rangers.

"In Round Rock."

In the cave, deep in the canebrakes, Jackson was taking leave of the Sam Bass gang. His horse was saddled, his blanket roll tied behind the saddle.

"Drop us a picture postcard," Seaborn Barnes told the retiring young outlaw.

"Who'd deliver it out here?"

"Name one of your kids for me," Murphy jeered.

Sam Bass said, "We've had good times, boy."

"It isn't likely I'll ever forget."

"But you've got to," cried Bass. "That's the whole trick of it. Pretend you never were an outlaw. Learn to despise and hate fellows like us."

"No, I never could do that," Jackson said, simply.

"You will in time. This is no life, Jackson, the one we're living. It's just a joke and a bluff. Hiding out from people costs a man an awful price. You miss other humans, male and female, and the way of things . . . birthdays, Fourth of July, Christmas and all the little things that you can share only with decent, law-abiding, God-fearing folk."

"Sam's talking sense," Hardie added. "Don't miss those things that he misses now."

"Live them for me, boy," cried Sam Bass. "Live them for me."

"Mr. Bass, you have my solemn promise," said young Jackson, fervently. His lips trembled and he turned and mounted his horse. He stuck out his hand to Bass, but the latter pretended not to see it.

"Good-by, boy," Bass said.

"Good-by, sir."

Jackson rode off. The remaining men looked after him for a long moment. Then Bass shook his head. "Kept calling me sir," he said, "right to the end."

The fateful day was overcast. A fitful wind blew from the West and raised eddies of dust on the grass-bare patches of ground near Round Rock. The four men, Bass, Barnes, Murphy and Jim Hardie spoke less than a dozen words between them on the trip from the canebrakes to Round Rock.

Each man had been told his job and Bass seemed to see no reason for going over it again. Hardie gave him a sideward glance as the pulled up before the hitchrail, across from the Round Rock Bank.

Bass's thoughts seemed to be elsewhere.

With Young Jackson?

Hardie tied his horse to the rail, started across the street. Murphy followed, then at an interval of a few yards, Sam Bass. Seaborn Barnes remained with the horses.

A dozen feet from the door of the bank, Hardie saw the curtain in the bank window move ever so slightly. He shot a glance over his shoulder, saw Murphy behind him, his face grim and sullen.

Hardie drew a deep breath, took two or three quick jumps forward and grabbed the doorknob. The door swung in and Hardie threw himself forward.

Over his body, guns banged and thundered. Murphy was hit in that first blast, but whirled and hobbled away. Sam Bass came to an abrupt halt. Across the street, a Ranger stepped out from cover, fired at him. Bass was half spun around by the force of the bullet. He drew his gun, pointed it at the Ranger . . . and did not fire.

Hardie, climbing to his feet, recalled in a flash what Sam Bass had told him in the hideout. He had never actually killed a man.

He could not do so, even now, in his final moments.

Bass stumbled forward. Another bullet, this one fired from the bank, hit him, but he made the horses. There, Seaborn Barnes was trying to cover Sam Bass.

His steady fire dropped a Ranger, running forward, stopped another across the street. Even when Sam Bass had gained the saddle, Barnes stood on the ground, firing slowly, methodically in all directions.

"Come on, Sebel!" gasped Bass, clutching at his chest.

"Right behind you, Sam," Seaborn sang out. He fired

once more, then took a forward step and plunged to the ground on his face.

Sam Bass's horse took off.

People began to spew out of the buildings. Hardie, coming out of the bank, almost collided with Captain McNelly.

"Got them all, except Bass," McNelly cried.

A Ranger pounded up. "He's hit bad," he cried. "Can't go far."

"Get your horses," McNelly ordered.

"If you don't mind, Captain," Hardie said, heavily, "I'll go and bring him in for you."

"You've done enough, Hardie," McNelly said.

Hardie shook his head. "I'll bring him in."

McNelly looked sharply at Hardie, hesitated, then shrugged. "All right, Hardie, go ahead, bring him in."

Bass made it into the canebrakes. Hardie, following within five minutes, had to keep his horse at a steady lope and even then could not catch up to him. That Bass was in trouble, he knew.

He stopped twice, saw blotches of blood on the ground. Near the canebrakes he saw Sam Bass's hat, and a little farther on found his gun. It was wet and sticky to his touch.

Sam Bass made it all the way to the cave.

Not inside though.

His horse was nearby and Hardie, dismounting, walked afoot to the cave's entrance. There he found Bass, sitting, his back against the sheer wall.

"Jim," he said, heavily. "Glad you made it."

Hardie moved up to Bass, knelt beside him. "It could get a mite lonely out here with nobody to talk to."

"I guess it could," Hardie said, heavily.

"Murphy?" asked Bass.

Hardie shrugged. "The Rangers got him."

"Seaborn Barnes?"

"Dead."

There was anguish in Sam Bass's eyes. He looked past Hardie, said, "Grieves me about the boy."

"Jackson?"

Bass nodded. "Tipped off the Rangers. Maybe he figured he had to start life with some reward money. Only thing is, I was good to him, Jim . . . and I never thought he'd be the one to turn me in."

"He didn't, Sam. Jackson's long gone. He'll be all right."

Bass's eyes came back to Hardie's. "He had to be the one that told them. Nobody else could have."

"What about me?"

"You?"

"I work for Wells Fargo. . . ."

Bass stared at him. "Said you were an outlaw. I believed you."

"You always believe everyone," said Hardie, bleakly.

"My biggest failing," agreed Bass.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way."

"Don't be sorry, boy. I'm just glad it wasn't Jackson. That would have been . . . too much. You . . . you had a job to do. You did it. Everybody has his own job to do. I had mine for a while and did it pretty good. So, no hard feelings. Sooner or later somebody was bound to get me. It happened to be you. Makes me feel kinda good that it wasn't a coyote like Murphy. Always thought he might turn me in for the reward. . . ." A groan was torn from Bass's lips. "You're a good man, Hardie!"

Hardie said, "I wish it could have been Murphy."

Sam Bass was sinking fast. For a long moment he was silent, then he began to pant heavily. The words came from his mouth with vast effort. "Jim . . . I've lost my downhill pull. . . ."

"I guess you have, Mr. Bass."

"Mister Bass?" Light flickered up in the dying man's eyes. "That's what the boy called me . . . up to the end. . . ." His eyes closed. For a moment it looked as if he was gone, but then the eyes opened once more.

"The world's bobbing all around," Sam Bass said.

His eyes closed for the last time.

Sam Bass was dead. The man was dead, but the legend was born. Sam Bass, the happy outlaw.

The Glory Hole

CURTIS, manager of the Denver branch of Wells Fargo, turned from the big iron safe and carried the steel cashbox to his desk. He took a key from his pocket, unlocked the box and swung back the lid. Then he looked into the face of Jim Hardie, bending forward.

"Up here in the mountains," Curtis said, "people like their money hard."

Hardie shrugged. "Like it that way in California, too." He reached into the cashbox and took out a gold coin. "Clark & Gruber. Don't see many of these any more."

"I know," said Curtis. "That was good money. Two grains heavier than the federal gold pieces—and made from Colorado gold." He smiled. "The government thought the private mints were gettin' a little too strong, so they bought them up. Clark & Gruber, back in '62. Course, there's a flaw in those Clark & Gruber pieces. Too soft. Wear out too quick. Little more alloy in the government pieces. Makes 'em harder and they last longer."

Hardie was still studying the Clark & Gruber eagle. "Some reason you want me to look at this?"

Curtis nodded emphatically. "That's one of the last pieces made by the Clark & Gruber mint before it was taken over by the government."

"Looks as good as new."

"It should. It's never been in circulation." He grimaced. "Correction. One thousand of these ten-dollar gold pieces were sent from Denver to Cripple Creek. They never got there."

"Road agents?"

Curtis nodded. "Two of 'em. A man named Mike Stevens and an unidentified man who was never caught."

"Stevens," mused Hardie. "He was before my time, but I seem to recall the name. . . ."

"He served ten years in the territorial prison. When he finished his term, he disappeared. That was a year ago."

Hardie looked inquiringly at the Wells Fargo branch manager. "And?"

"The money that Stevens and his partner got—the ten thousand in gold Clark and Gruber eagles—it was never recovered."

"I see," said Hardie. He turned over the coin in his hand. "This one of them?"

Curtis nodded. "Not one of them showed up during the ten years that Stevens was in prison, but now, inside of a single month, seven have come into circulation. That is, seven that we've recovered."

He crossed the room to a wall map. Hardie followed. Curtis's index finger picked out a spot in the northwestern section of Colorado. "The coins—all of them—came from this area."

A frown came over Hardie's face. "Wouldn't you say that Mike Stevens had paid in full for what he did?"

"Yes, I'd say, that, Jim. He paid . . . at the rate of a thousand dollars a year. But his partner never paid."

"And I'm elected to find him?"

Curtis hesitated, then shook his head. "The gold is what we want. You see, Wells Fargo paid the claim for that robbery. Ten thousand dollars." He smiled grimly. "Wells Fargo likes to square its accounts."

Jim Hardie pulled lightly on the lines and the horse stopped. The sight that met Hardie's eyes was a breathtaking one. Below him was a grassy, rolling valley, ringed by giant trees and gradual slopes. A little stream ran through the bottom of the little valley.

Alongside of the stream was a pair of twin ruts, a seldom-used road. Directly below Hardie, some half mile away, was a cluster of buildings. They were the only buildings Hardie could see in the entire valley, but there were undoubtedly others, concealed by the occasional clusters of trees or shrubs which dotted the valley.

The rarefied atmosphere of the high elevation where Hardie sat on the seat of the light wagon caused him to take great lungful of exhilarating air.

He half turned in the seat and smiled at what he saw behind him—a wagon, loaded with a conglomeration of merchandise that would gladden the hearts of many a man and woman of the isolated sections of the land.

It was a peddler's wagon and it contained pots, pans, food for man or beast, wearing apparel, tools, implements and a tremendous miscellany of household articles. Needles, pins, threads, mirrors, scissors, everything that the man from whom Hardie had rented the wagon believed it was necessary to carry to the people who visited stores only occasionally and towns and cities almost never.

The wagon was old and creaking but it was sturdily built for rough travel in country where there were only primitive roads and sometimes no roads at all.

The horse that pulled the wagon, while uncurried and rough-looking, was Jim Hardie's special riding mount. It had never before been put into harness and it did not care for its task one bit. Hardie had to keep a close eye on the white-stockinged bay.

He picked up the lines again, clucked and the horse started down the gradual grade.

Five minutes later, Hardie drew up before a low, one-story log building. A porch ran along the entire front of the building and from the overhanging roof hung a sign. It read: COOKE'S CORNERS.

An unshaven, slit-eyed man of about thirty, sat on the porch. He got to his feet as Hardie jumped down from the peddler's wagon.

"Morning, neighbor," Hardie greeted the man cheerfully.

Ben Bailey regarded the wagon with a jaundiced eye.

"You're wastin' your time here, mister. Cooke's selling, not buying."

"That's what I thought," said Hardie. "Some things I want to buy."

He nodded to the man, stepped up on the porch and entered the log-cabin store.

The store contained everything Hardie had on his wagon but it contained them in greater quantities. And there were some larger items that he did not have on the wagon. Sewing machines. Plows.

A grizzled, sour-faced man of about fifty was behind one of the counters. He turned as Hardie entered the store.

"Howdy, stranger," he said.

"Mr. Cooke?"

"That's me." He smiled, showing snagged teeth that made the smile almost a leer. "Somethin' for you?"

Hardie nodded and looked around. Then he stepped to a display of bright tin dippers. He took one off the hook. "How much for these?"

Cooke came around the counter. "Those are real good quality, mister. Twelve gauge tin. Mmm, oughtta get sixty cents for them, but you can have one for four bits."

Hardie took down all of the dippers, one by one, piling them up in the crook of his left arm. He counted them as he took them down. "Eight. How much for the lot?"

"You want all eight?"

"Yep."

Hardie deposited the dippers on the counter and reached for three enameled sauce pans. "I'll take these, too."

"Those pans're worth a dollar'n a half apiece," said Cooke. "Four-fifty, plus four dollars . . . call it eight, for the lot."

The front door opened and Ben Bailey came in. He stopped to watch the proceedings before him. Hardie gave him a short glance.

"You couldn't make it seven dollars for the works?" he asked Cooke. "I've got to make a little profit myself."

"Profit?" exclaimed Cooke.

"I figure to sell them."

"I thought you were settin' up housekeepin'."

Ben Bailey called: "Take a look outside."

Cooke gave Hardie a sharp glance, then strode forward to where he could look through the window. He looked and wheeled back.

"You're a peddler!"

"No law against it," said Hardie, cheerfully.

"And you'll be selling this stuff around here, to my customers?"

"Your customers—or the mail-order house."

Cooke said, angrily. "I'm not selling anything wholesale that you're gonna make a profit on."

"I'm going to make very little profit on these," Hardie said. "I've got to sell my merchandise for less than you do."

"You just said the wrong thing, peddler," Cooke declared grimly. "You're not gettin' anything from me to sell for less than I have to charge folks."

Hardie winced. "What I should have said was that I have to carry certain items as an accommodation." He gestured to the dippers and pans. "Guess I'll have to pay you your price for these."

"Price has gone up," snapped Cooke. "That stuff'll cost you ten dollars."

"Ten dollars!"

"An' I'm not so sure that I'll let you have it for that."

Hardie said, quickly, "You can't refuse to sell to a cash customer." He drew out a sheaf of greenbacks and skinned off a bill. "Here's a twenty."

Cooke hesitated, then scowling, took the bill.

"Like my change in hard money," Hardie said. "People in the back country don't like greenbacks."

Cooke went behind the counter and drew out his cash drawer. He took out a coin and plinked it on the counter. Hardie picked it up.

"A ten-dollar Clark & Gruber eagle."

"It's good, anywhere," Cooke snapped.

Hardie nodded. "Don't see many of these anymore." He dropped the coin carelessly into his pocket. He gathered up his purchases and headed for the door. The two men in the store watched him go out, then exchanged glances.

"A trouble maker," said Cooke.

Ben Bailey grinned wickedly. "You want I should?" He winked at the storekeeper.

Leaving Cooke's Corners, Jim Hardie drove his peddler's wagon along the road that followed the winding stream. The water in the little river was so clear that Hardie could see the creek bed every time he got fairly close to the water.

After a while the road began to climb and the wagon road led through giant ponderosa pines. Some two hours from the store in the valley, the wagon came into a clearing in the center of which stood a log cabin.

There was a small log barn about a rod from the cabin and between the two buildings and slightly to the rear was a waist-high structure over which was a superstructure. The thing looked very much like a well, but was actually a "glory hole," a shaft leading into the ground that followed a vein of mineral.

Jim Kinnaird, a weary-looking man in his early fifties, was turning the crank of the windlass. He pulled up a heavy ore bucket, caught hold of it and dumped the ore on the ground beside the glory hole. He dropped the bucket into the hole and unwound the windlass.

Hardie watched the procedure at the glory hole for a moment or two, then aware that someone had come out of the log cabin, leaped lightly to the ground.

Lucy Kinnaird came toward the peddler's wagon. She was an attractive girl of about twenty-one, wearing a gingham housedress. Her hair was caught in a pony tail. She smiled at Hardie.

"Howdy, ma'am," Hardie said, bowing. Then, smiling, he corrected himself. "Miss."

"You're a peddler."

"Yes, ma'am," Hardie said, enthusiastically. "I'm your store on wheels. I've got a complete line of merchandise for man, woman or beast—pots, pans, stove polish, extracts, thread, pins, needles, boots, shoes, slippers, pants, dresses, hair curlers, even canned oysters."

"Oysters?" exclaimed Lucy. She looked at Hardie skeptically. "You're making fun."

"No, miss," Hardie said. "I've got them, all right. And the only reason I don't carry fresh oysters is that I can't carry ice around with me."

He rolled up the canvas side of the wagon and rummaging about a moment, held up a can. "Oysters!"

Lucy started to reach for the can, then caught herself. Her face showed aversion. "People don't really eat oysters, do they?"

"They certainly do, miss" Hardie said, cheerfully. "And worse than that. Why, in Delmonico's in New York City, they serve snails."

Lucy shuddered.

"No accounting for tastes, miss," Hardie went on.

Kinnaird, at the glory hole, watched Jim Hardie, with a frown on his features. He leaned over into the well and called down. "Come up and get some fresh air, Cliff."

He straightened, then waiting a moment, began to wind up the windlass. After a few moments the head and shoulders of a young giant in his mid-twenties came over the top of the well structure. He caught hold of the rim around the hole and leaped lightly to the ground. His eyes went to the peddler's wagon where Hardie was showing merchandise to Lucy Kinnaird.

"What's that contraption?" he exclaimed.

"Let's go see," suggested Kinnaird.

By the time Kinnaird and Cliff reached the peddler's wagon, Lucy had heaped a small pile of merchandise on the ground. "I'll go get some money." She turned and saw Kinnaird. "Oh, Dad, I've bought some things we need."

"So I see," said Kinnaird.

"Is it . . . all right?"

"We usually buy our things down at Cooke's."

Lucy's face showed disappointment. "You don't want me to buy these things?"

Kinnaird hesitated, then nodded. "It's all right, Lucy." He smiled wanly. "You're running the house."

Lucy gave him a smile and, turning, ran toward the house. Hardie extended his hand to Kinnaird. "My name's Jim Hardie, traveling merchant. I've got everything for man or beast, house or barn, field or stream. Gunpowder, fishhooks, horse liniment, birdseed, tobacco, candy and geetars. . . ."

"And a fancy line of gab," said Kinnaird, wryly.

"Need it in my business," grinned Hardie. "Don't believe I've seen you before, sir. You live around here long?"

"Long enough." Kinnaird looked shrewdly at Hardie. "You've been here before?"

Hardie shrugged. "Don't rightly know. I keep travelin'. I make a sort of wide circle around Colorado. Skip the towns most of the time and keep to the country. It all looks pretty

much alike." He grimaced. "The storekeepers don't like me. They say I cut into their trade. Fella down the valley, Book, Crook. . . ."

"Cooke," said Kinnaird.

"Cooke, yeah. He was real put out with me. Claimed I was underselling him." Hardie winked at Kinnaird. "Reckon I do, on some items."

Kinnaird frowned. "We do our buying at Cooke's. Find him pretty fair, as a rule."

"Oh, I guess he's as good as most storekeepers," Hardie said, easily. "But they've got to keep big stocks and charge you for their overheads. Me, I got very little overhead. Sometimes nothing but the sky and the stars and the moon." He saw Lucy returning from the house and went on, "That's the reason I'm in this business, I guess. I like the overhead . . . the blue sky, the mountain air, that a man can breathe." Lucy had stopped a few feet away and was listening with a rapt look on her face. "Hate crowds, buildings. Guess that's why you live out here, I imagine. You want to move around in. . . ."

A bleakness had settled over Kinnaird. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Jim Hardie," Hardie sent a sly look toward Lucy. "Only thing'd make a man like me settle down is a girl, the right kind of girl."

Lucy suddenly became flustered. She thrust out a hand. "Here's—here's your money, Mr. Hardie."

Hardie accepted the bill from her. "Ah, yes, twenty dollars. Let's see, I said seven dollars and a half, didn't I? That means you've got twelve dollars and fifty cents change coming to you." He reached into a pocket and brought out a crumpled bill. "Mmm, you don't happen to have anything smaller than a twenty, do you?" He looked hopefully at Kinnaird. "I try to get hard money, usually."

Lucy said, worriedly, "That's all we have in the house."

Kinnaird said, harshly, "I've no hard money. Perhaps you'd better take back. . . ."

"Nossir," said Hardie promptly. "Jim Hardie never loses the sale, if he can help it. I'll make the change, all right."

He fished in another pocket, brought out some coins. "Here it is, two dollars and a half . . . just ten more. . . ." He reached into another pocket and brought out a single coin. "A ten-dollar goldpiece. That does it. Forgot I had this. Got it down at the corners. . . ."

He extended the change to Lucy, but Kinnaird stepped forward and took it. He ran over the coins, stared for an instant at the gold coin, then put the money into his pocket.

"Thank you for your trade, miss," said Hardie. He extended his hand to Kinnaird. "Kinnaird, did you say?"

"I didn't say."

"I told him our name," said Lucy. "Good-by, Mr. Hardie."

"Good-by, Miss . . . Lucy." He climbed aboard his wagon and caught up the lines. "Giddap, Napoleon!"

Lucy, her father and Cliff, stood in a small group, watching the peddler wagon roll off. Then Kinnaird said to Lucy, "I don't want to criticize you, Lucy, but I don't think we ought to encourage these peddlers. . . ."

Lucy raised a tremulous face to her father, bit her lip, then turned and ran toward the log cabin. Kinnaird looked after her.

"Now, what'd I say to her?" he said.

"I dunno, Mr. Kinnaird," Cliff said.

Kinnaird shook his head. "Never understood her mother, don't understand her. Well, let's go back to work."

They walked to the glory hole but there Kinnaird fished in his pockets and exclaimed, "Seeing that peddler reminded me I needed some tobacco and stuff. Think I'll ride down to the corners."

"Now?" exclaimed Cliff.

"You object to a little loafing?"

Cliff grinned. "Not me."

"You want to keep busy, cut one of the small pines. We can use some firewood."

Cliff made a wry face as Kinnaird walked swiftly to the log-cabin barn. A few minutes later he came out riding a saddle mare. He clucked to the horse, kicked it lightly in the rump and it went off at a fast run.

Hearing the clatter of the horses' hoofs, Lucy came out of the house. Her eyes followed her father, anxiously. Cliff strolled up.

"Where's he going?" Lucy asked.

"To the corners. Said he had to have some tobacco."

"But he's got almost a full can in the house" cried Lucy.

Jim Hardie, driving his wagon along a mere trail in the heavy pine country, stuck his head out beside the edge of the wagon and peered back in the direction from which he had come.

He wasn't certain and pulled up the horse. He heard it, then, the galloping of a horse somewhere in the rear. A turn in the trail, however, concealed the running animal.

Turning ahead, Hardie reached down behind the wagon seat and brought out a revolver. He laid it on the seat behind him, then started his horse up again.

He kept one ear cocked as he drove along. The galloping of hoofs could still be heard, but they were duller sounding and off the road, now. Whoever was riding, had moved in among the trees.

A minute went by, two. Hardie picked up the revolver. At that instant a bullet whined past Hardie's face. The bark of a rifle came a moment later, but by that time Hardie had sprung from the wagon and was sprawled on a bed of pine needles. He raised himself up, to his knees, thrust his revolver out ahead of him and fired twice, three times. He waited then, with cocked revolver.

The horse was running again. But away from Hardie, headed back down the mountain, Hardie waited a moment longer, then got to his feet. He thrust the revolver under the waistband of his trousers, then climbed back into the wagon.

He started his horse forward, then made a wide circle and headed back the way he had come.

At Cooke's store, Kinnaird, his face flushed angrily, was holding out his palm under Cooke's face. A gold eagle was in the palm. "Where'd you get this?" Kinnaird demanded.

Cooke picked up the coin from Kinnaird's palm and examined it. "Looks like a perfectly good ten-dollar piece to me."

"Don't give me that," Kinnaird retorted. "You know what I'm driving at. You gave that to a peddler."

Cooke shrugged. "There was a peddler in here today and I guess I did give him some change." He nodded. "Yeah, I remember now. He said he wanted hard money."

Kinnaird took the coin back from Cooke. "Where did you get this?"

"Where I get all my money," Cooke replied, "from customers." He indicated Kinnaird. "You've paid me in gold yourself."

"Not any Clark & Gruber pieces."

"How do you know you haven't?"

"I know."

"Well," said Cooke, defiantly. "I don't know. And I don't know for sure that that's the piece I gave the peddler." His eyes suddenly narrowed. "Peddler? You think maybe he isn't a peddler?"

"That's exactly what I mean," Kinnaird said, grimly.

It was early evening. Hardie's horse was in the corral behind the Kinnaird barn. The peddler's wagon stood some sixty or seventy feet in front of the log cabin. Beside it was a fire of glowing coals. Hardie sat with his back propped against one of the wagon wheels, strumming a guitar. Across the fire sat Lucy Kinnaird, her hands linked about her knees. She was listening and watching Hardie with rapt attention.

A few yards away, Cliff stood in the gloom, just outside the ring of light made by the campfire. A heavy scowl was on his face.

Hardie began to sing, an old folk ballad. He sang well, low and vibrantly. He strummed the guitar lightly, not letting the twanging drown out his voice.

He finished the song and Lucy Kinnaird clapped her hands softly. "That was wonderful," she declared. "It's the most beautiful song I ever heard."

"My father used to sing it to my mother," Hardie said, quietly.

Cliff moved forward. "Mister," he said, heavily, "you sing purty but it's time you git now."

"Git? Why, I'm camping here for the night."

"No, you're not," said Cliff.

Lucy scrambled to her feet. "Cliff, it isn't up to you to say whether Mr. Hardie can stay here or not."

"Your father don't want no strangers around. You know that."

"My father isn't here," retorted Lucy.

"I'm looking after you while he's gone," Cliff said, doggedly.

"Wait a minute, now," Hardie interrupted. "I don't want to make any trouble. . . ."

"You've already made it," Cliff said, angrily. "Sweet-talkin' around here, singin' . . ." He took a step toward Hardie. "I'm givin' you just five minutes to pack and get out."

Hardie got to his feet and laid the guitar on the seat of the wagon. Lucy stepped up to Cliff. "How dare you talk like that, you . . . you hired man!"

She made a raking movement toward Cliff's face. Cliff threw out a hand to ward her off and his hand struck Lucy's shoulder. She cried out, tried to hit Cliff with tiny fists. Cliff tried to capture her fists, could not and threw his arms about Lucy.

"Let me go!" Lucy cried, furiously. "Let me go!"

Hardie stepped in, grabbed one of Cliff's arms and pulled. Cliff let his arm be pulled away, releasing one of Lucy's hands.

She struck him in the face. Stung, Cliff sprang back, to meet a hard blow on the jaw from Hardie's fist.

Cliff let out a roar and sprang at Hardie. Hardie ducked under a wild swing and smashed Cliff again on the jaw. Cliff sat down suddenly.

Neither Hardie nor the others had heard a horse clopping into the clearing, but suddenly Kinnaird was in front of the cabin, springing down from his mount.

"What's going on here?" he cried, angrily.

Lucy, startled, whirled. Then she exclaimed in relief, "Cliff struck me, Dad! He hit me and when Mr. Hardie tried to help me he attacked him."

Kinnaird sent a look at Hardie, at Cliff, still sitting on the ground, half stunned, then back to his daughter. "Seems to me, Cliff got the worst of it," he growled.

"He had it coming," cried Lucy. "He tried to chase Mr. Hardie away and when I said he couldn't, he. . . ."

"Lucy!" exclaimed Kinnaird. "Hold it a moment. I don't know what you're babbling about." He turned to Hardie. "I thought you left here this afternoon."

"I came back. Somebody tried to shoot me on the trail. Figured I'd be safer among folks."

Kinnaird regarded him sharply. "Somebody tried to kill you?"

"They did," cried Lucy. "He told me about it. Somebody shot at him."

Cliff climbed wobbily to his feet. Kinnaird's forehead creased into a heavy frown. "Things are happening around here that I don't like. I don't like it at all."

"Well I don't mind telling you, Mr. Kinnaird," Hardie said, "I don't exactly like being shot at. I'm a peaceable man as long as folks'll let me be."

"Hardie, or whatever your name is," said Kinnaird, "I've had enough trouble in my time to last me the rest of my life. I moved out here, to the edge of nowhere to get away from people. I want peace and quiet. I want to be let alone. You can camp here for the night, but in the morning I want you to leave. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Kinnaird."

Kinnaird made a signal to Lucy and toward the cabin. "Come."

"Yes, Father." Lucy smiled at Hardie. "Good night, Mr. Hardie. I—I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Miss Lucy."

Hardie was rolled in his blankets, beside the peddler's wagon, when boots crunched the ground near him. He gripped his revolver under the blanket and opened his eyes.

Kinnaird stopped beside him. "Hardie," he said in a low voice.

Hardie threw back a fold of the blanket, revealing the revolver in his hand. He looked at Kinnaird, then sat up.

"You're no peddler," Kinnaird accused.

"I've had other jobs," said Hardie.

"What are you? Government man . . . Pinkerton?" He waited for a reply, then said, quietly: "I've served my time."

"Ten years is a pretty big chunk out of a man's life."

"No one knows it better than I do," said Kinnaird, bitterly.

"Does Lucy know?"

Kinnaird shook his head. "She thinks I was in Australia. She knows nothing . . . and she mustn't, understand?"

"I won't tell her."

"She was a child," Kinnaird said, bleakly, "when—when it happened. An Aunt—Lucy's great-aunt—took care of her back East. I paid for what I did ten years ago. I paid dearly. What do you want from me?"

"The company I work for," said Hardie, "Wells Fargo. They lost ten thousand dollars."

"I never saw a dollar of that money!"

"It was taken from the stagecoach, by you—and another man."

"Look up the records of the trial," Kinnaird said, poignantly. "I was picked up a half mile from the scene of the holdup. I was shot—badly wounded."

"Your partner got away."

"There was no partner."

"The stagecoach driver testified. . . ."

"The stagecoach driver," Kinnaird said, contemptuously.

Hardie threw back the rest of the blanket and got to his feet. He thrust the revolver under his belt and leaned against the peddler's wagon. "I did look up the records of the trial, Mr. Stevens. I mean, Kinnaird, if you'd rather be called that. The driver testified that two men stopped the stage, after dropping the shotgun messenger. They broke open the strongbox and took ten thousand dollars in gold that was being shipped by the Clark & Gruber mint to Cripple Creek . . . ten thousand dollars that has never been recovered."

"Maybe, there wasn't any ten thousand," suggested Kinnaird.

"Oh, there was, all right. And the money could be identi-

fied. It was the last batch of ten-dollar gold pieces struck off by the Clark & Gruber mint . . . in fact, the only ten-dollar gold pieces bearing the 1862 date." He paused. "None of those pieces ever came into circulation. Until a few months ago."

"So, that's it!" cried Kinnaird.

Hardie nodded. "They came from this area. Seven 1862 Clark & Gruber ten-dollar gold pieces. None showed up during the ten years you were in prison, but as soon as you got out, the coins began to appear. Wouldn't you say that was rather suspicious, Mr. Kinnaird?"

Kinnaird stared at Hardie for a long moment, then turned on his heel and walked toward the cabin. He reached the porch, hesitated, then went into the house.

Hardie slept somewhat late the next morning. He was rolling up his blankets, when Cliff, who had been picking over the ore outside the glory hole, suddenly whirled away and started running for the cabin.

"Mr. Kinnaird!" he yelled. "Mr. Kinnaird!"

Kinnaird came out of the cabin. "What is it, Cliff?"

"Gold, Mr. Kinnaird! We've hit another pocket. . . ." He thrust a chunk of rock at Kinnaird.

Kinnaird started to examine the ore. Lucy popped out of the house. "What is it? Are we . . . are we rich?"

"This looks rather good," said Kinnaird, dubiously.

"Good?" cried Cliff. "It's wonderful."

"Let me see," said Lucy eagerly. She snatched the ore from her father's hand. "Gold," she cried, in awe, then looked up toward Hardie, who was coming up. "Mr. Hardie, we've struck it rich!"

"That's great," said Hardie, with restrained enthusiasm.

"We hit a small pocket before," said Kinnaird, matter-of-factly. "It petered out."

"It wasn't nothing like this," cried Cliff. "Look—look at that glob of gold there."

"Do you mind?" Hardie asked, reaching to Lucy for the ore.

She handed it to him and he studied it closely, nodding thoughtfully.

"It's gold, all right."

"What is it worth?" Lucy asked, eagerly.

"Hard to say, maybe a hundred dollars."

"That last bucket of ore, yesterday," Cliff said. "I didn't get to look at it until this morning."

"That's the way it runs," said Kinnaird. "You scarcely make wages for days at a time, then a little pocket. . . ."

"Let's hope it's more than a pocket, Mr. Kinnaird," said Hardie. "With ore as rich as this you ought to sink another shaft."

"Have to talk to Cooke, about that."

"Cooke?" asked Hardie.

"It's his mine. I'm just leasing it from him."

"I didn't know that," exclaimed Hardie.

"We get half," cried Lucy, enthralled. "And half of a million dollars is. . . ."

"A million?" exclaimed Kinnaird. "Whoa, Lucy, girl, you'll never get a million out of one little glory hole like this."

"Do what Mr. Hardie suggests, sink another, what is it, shaft?"

"I don't know if I can do that," said Kinnaird, thoughtfully. "The agreement was that I'd work this one shaft only. Let's take a look at that ore."

He started toward the glory hole, the others following. They reached the ore pile beside the glory hole and everyone began picking up chunks of quartz. Hardie selected a rather large chunk and was examining it, when Cliff glowered at him.

"Here, you, drop that!"

Hardie looked at him in surprise. "I don't know what.

. . . ."

"It's a little too easy to drop a piece of that in your pocket."

Lucy exclaimed, "Cliff, how dare you!"

But Hardie grinned and tossed the ore back to the pile.

"I see what you mean," he said to Cliff.

"Well, I trust you," Lucy declared, thrusting a piece of ore at Hardie.

Hardie glanced at the ore, suddenly frowned and turned the rock over and over in his hand. Cliff and Kinnaird watched him closely.

"Something wrong with that?" Kinnaird demanded, suspiciously.

"I don't rightly know," Hardie replied. "I'm not a mining man, although I've handled some ore in my time. Mmm. . . ." He scratched at the ore with his thumbnail. "This is as pure gold as I've ever seen. You'd almost think. . . ."

"You're a peddler," Cliff said, contemptuously. "What do you know about gold?"

Kinnaird threw up a detaining hand. "Just a minute, Cliff. Go ahead, Hardie. Finish what you were saying."

"That's about all. I had the idea that gold was usually spotted through the quartz, specks, little strings of it." He hesitated. "Of course, over in the Mother Lode country in California they used to find stuff like this, huge globs of the yellow stuff."

"That's what this is," cried Cliff.

Hardie looked at Kinnaird. "What do you do with the ore, Mr. Kinnaird? Send it to a smelter?"

"Cooke does that. I deliver it to him and he pays me every time he gets paid from the smelter. It's his glory hole. I'm only the lessor."

As Hardie pulled up his wagon in front of Cooke's store, Cooke stepped out on to the porch. "You're still in this neighborhood?" he sneered.

"Won't be much longer."

"Good!" snapped Cooke.

"I can take a hint. Somebody took a shot at me yesterday."

"Missed you! Too bad."

"That fellow who was here yesterday, the ugly one. . . ."

Ben Bailey came out of the store. "You lookin' for me?" he asked, nastily.

"I am, if you're the fella tried to kill me."

"Suppose I said I was?"

The creaking wheels of a wagon caught Cooke's attention. He looked past Hardie. Hardie also turned. A buckboard was approaching the store. It was driven rapidly by Kinnaird. Beside him was Lucy. Five sacks of ore were in the back of the wagon. Cliff sprawled on top of the sacks.

Lucy stood up in the moving buckboard and waved. "We've struck it rich," she yelled. "We've struck it rich!"

Kinnaird pulled up the wagon and Lucy leaped to the ground. Cooke went toward the buckboard. "Well, whaddya know," he said. "Another pocket!"

"A good one this time," Kinnaird said.

He climbed down from the buckboard, but turned back and took a rifle from the wagon. Cliff, in the rear, straightened up.

"A big pocket, Mr. Cooke. Thousands, in this one."

Hardie said to Lucy, in a low tone, "Go into the store."

Lucy was startled. "What?"

"Go into the store!"

Kinnaird and Cooke went around to the rear of the buckboard. Kinnaird loosened the drawstring of one of the sacks. He reached inside and brought out several pieces of ore. He picked out one of them and handed it to Cooke.

"Not bad, not bad at all," Cooke said. "Does it all run as good as this?"

"No. Some of the quartz hasn't more than a speck of ore. Other pieces have globs of gold."

"Pure gold," said Hardie.

"That's the best kind." Cooke looked sharply at Hardie. "You see this?"

"I was there when they made the strike." He looked at Cliff. "This morning, eh, Cliff?"

"I found it this morning," Cliff said, carefully. "But we dug it out yesterday."

"Your share of this ought to run pretty good," Cooke said, to Kinnaird.

"About five thousand?" asked Hardie.

"Five?" Cooke cocked his head to one side. "For a peddler, you're sticking your nose into things that don't concern you."

"I'm not exactly a full-time peddler," Hardie said. "I've got another job. With the company you used to work for, Mr. Cooke. Wells Fargo."

Cooke stiffened.

"Wells Fargo? I never worked for. . . ." Then he whirled to Kinnaird. "You been talkin'?"

"He hasn't said much," Hardie said. "In fact he's said a lot less than he could have said . . . that you were a Wells Fargo driver ten years ago when the stage was held up by a lone bandit . . ."

"Two bandits," snapped Cooke. "I testified at the trial. . . ."

"I read that testimony. You said two bandits held up the stage and stole ten thousand. The truth of the matter was that only one man held up the coach. He was wounded by the shotgun messenger and ran off. The strongbox was then robbed of ten thousand in gold, after the driver killed the messenger."

"That's a lie!" cried Cooke.

Hardie shook his head stubbornly. "At the trial, Cooke, you learned that the money could be identified. You never dared spend it. You waited . . . you waited ten years until the man who was sent to prison served his time. Then you began to get rid of some of the money. You thought you

could feed it into circulation and if some of it should be traced to you, you could say it was passed to you, by the man who had robbed it in the first place . . . the man who had spent ten years in prison. . . ."

"Well?" sneered Cooke. "If any of the money's been traced here, there's your man. Only you can't send him to prison again for the same crime, can you?"

"We can send his accomplice to prison. The man who really stole the money."

"All you need is the evidence . . . and the money."

"Here's a coin you gave me yesterday," said Hardie, tossing a gold coin to Cooke.

Cooke did not even try to catch the coin. "Oh, did I give you that? I must have taken it in at the store. Maybe from my friend, Kinnaird. Any better evidence?"

Hardie reached into the open sack of ore and took out a piece.

"This gold. I think one of our experts will be able to analyze it and I think the analysis will prove that it is exactly the same gold alloy as in the Clark & Gruber ten-dollar gold pieces."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Cooke said, harshly.

"Feeding the gold pieces out one by one was too slow for you," Hardie went on, remorselessly. "You melted them down and had the gold spilled over a mess of quartz dug out of your glory hole. You knew it'd come back to you. Of course you had to give a share of it to Kinnaird, but that was all right. It was insurance, in case your little scheme was discovered. He could be blamed. He was the logical one to have hidden the money ten years ago . . . and melted it down now."

Behind Hardie, Cliff suddenly reached for his gun. He got it clear and was raising it, when Hardie whirled and hurled the chunk of ore at Cliff. The rock hit the young giant in the forehead and he went over backwards, tumbling from the wagon to the ground.

The time necessary to throw the rock at Cliff almost proved fatal to Hardie. By the time he had whirled back, Cooke's gun was out. Kinnaird saved Hardie, then. Reversing the butt of the rifle he smashed Cooke in the face with it. Hardie whipped out his gun, saw that Cooke was taken care of and sent a shot at Ben Bailey running toward him, gun in hand.

Kinnaird stood, looking down at Cooke. "He's my brother," he said, tonelessly. "That's why I never told about him

at the trial." The door of the store slammed open and Kinaird said, quickly, "Don't tell Lucy."

"I won't," said Hardie.

He smiled at Lucy, when she came toward him.

John Wesley Hardin

JIM HARDIE rode up to the sheriff's office and dismounted. As he tied his horse to the hitchrail, he glanced at the two armed guards, who stood, one on each side of the door, leading to the sheriff's office, and the jail beyond.

The guards were watching him closely. One of them raised his rifle, but the other said quickly:

"He's the one—Jim Hardie. The Wells Fargo man."

Hardie ducked under the hitchrail and moved toward the sheriff's office. "What's that mean?" he asked. "I'm the one?"

"The one who arrested young Lambert," the guard said.

Hardie nodded. "Yeah, I'm the one, all right."

Frowning, he entered the sheriff's office. Sheriff Tige, a lean man in his early fifties, got up from his desk and came forward toward Hardie, with outstretched hand.

"Back for the trial, all right."

"Why not?" demanded Hardie. He shrugged in the direction of the street. "What's eating this town? People looking at me like I'm a—a ghost or something. Double guards in front of the jail."

"Saturday's court day," said the sheriff.

"Today's only Thursday."

"Any town gets a little itchy just before a big murder trial."

"Not this far in advance. What is it, Ed?"

The sheriff frowned and hesitated. "Lambert's been talking."

"What's he been saying?"

The sheriff avoided Hardie's probing eyes. "I'd sure hate to be the only witness at a man's murder trial. Do you realize that without your testimony, Lambert would go free?"

"I can only tell what I know." Hardie paused. "I'm afraid that's going to convict Lambert." He frowned. "I've always

had the feeling that Lambert is protecting someone—an accomplice—a man behind him. . . .”

“That’s what he’s been dropping hints about. To visitors. Not to me. He won’t talk to me.”

“Mind if I talk to him?”

With alacrity, the sheriff stepped to the barred door, leading to the jail. He turned the key and drew open the door.

Hardie went into the cell block. It consisted of four cells, but only one was occupied, an unshaven, sullen-eyed young man, not more than twenty-one or -two. He was sprawled out on the cot, but swung his feet to the floor as Hardie came in.

“I think you and I should have a little talk,” Hardie said.

“Why? You worried?” There was mockery in young Lambert’s tone.

“I’m not the one they’ll be giving the necktie party for,” retorted Hardie.

“I’m not, either,” said Lambert. “When the time comes, I’ll be taken care of.”

“By who? Your partner?”

“I had no partner,” Lambert said flatly.

“You never planned that job yourself.” Hardie looked sharply through the bars. “You’re protecting someone.”

“Think what you like.”

“You’re making the greatest mistake of your life,” Hardie said, earnestly. “You think this friend will come forward at the last moment and save you. He won’t. You’ll take that last ride alone.”

“Maybe I will and maybe I won’t,” Lambert said, doggedly.

“You will! Talk now and you might save your life.”

“What are you going to offer?” Lambert demanded. “Life in prison, instead of a rope?” He snorted. “No thanks. No deal.”

Hardie regarded the young prisoner thoughtfully. Then, shaking his head, he left the cell block and returned to the sheriff’s office.

The sheriff looked at him questioningly. “I’ve been trying to make him talk for a week. Now, you know why I’ve got a double guard on the door.”

“You figure he has friends?”

“One, at least. Makes sense, doesn’t it, that he was taking orders from somebody? The boy isn’t smart enough to plan and carry out that kind of a robbery, alone. I’ve got that much out of him. He’s holding out, but he figures if he’s convicted he’ll expose the man who was behind him.”

Hardie started for the door, but stopped as the sheriff followed him.

"You're the only one who can convict him," the sheriff went on. "So the question is, Jim—till the trial's over, who do I get to guard you?"

"No one," Hardie said, testily and walked out.

Leaving his horse at the hitchrail in front of the sheriff's office, Hardie walked to the hotel.

Sam Adams, owner of the hotel, stood on the veranda as Hardie came up. "Heard you were back in town, Mr. Hardie," he said.

"Word gets around fast," Hardie said, shortly.

"There's somebody wants to see you. Mary Lambert, the prisoner's sister. She came for the trial."

"She's one person I don't want to talk to," said Hardie and went past Adams, into the hotel.

Half angry at himself, Hardie went directly to the desk and signed the register. While the clerk was searching for a room key, a young girl of not more than nineteen or twenty, got up from a chair near the window and came up behind Hardie.

"Mr. Hardie," she began.

Hardie winced as he turned to face the attractive girl. "You're Miss Lambert," he said, lamely.

She nodded. "I want to talk to you about my brother."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not."

She flared. "Are you afraid to talk to me?"

"I'm not afraid, but there's nothing to say."

"In the interest of a man's life? Nothing to say? Isn't it obvious to you that he's protecting somebody?"

"Yes. But who?"

"I don't know, but does it matter? The fact is, he wasn't in it alone. Are you going to let him die for somebody else's crime? Is that all Wells Fargo is interested in—getting him hanged and out of the way?"

"We're interested in the free and open transportation of valuables and human lives," Hardie replied, coolly.

"I know my brother," Mary Lambert went on, passionately. "He's good. You must believe that!"

"I'd like to, but I can't."

"Why? Why not?"

"A few minutes ago I offered him a chance to co-operate with the law. He didn't want it. What he's waiting for is some kind of violence to set him free. A jail break, or better yet, a murder."

"A murder!" cried Mary Lambert.

"Mine. If I were dead, they'd have to turn him loose."

Hardie turned his back on the girl, took the key proffered to him by the room clerk and walked to the stairs, leading up to the second floor.

An hour later, Hardie came out of the hotel. Dusk had fallen and he stood for a moment on the veranda looking over the street and listening to the noises. After a while, he stepped down from the veranda onto the sidewalk and started off to the left.

Flame lanced at him from a passageway. Flame, followed by a sharp clap, like thunder. It was answered instantly, before Hardie could draw his own gun, by a gun across the street.

A man cried out, lurched forward onto the wooden sidewalk in front of Jim Hardie and pitched to the street, on his face. Sheriff Tige came running across the street.

Hardie, gun in hand, stepped out to look down at the dead man. Sheriff Tige pounded up.

"How'd you happen to spot him?" Hardie asked.

"I've been trying to keep an eye on you."

"I thought I told you. . . ." Hardie began, then stopped. "Thanks."

"You can't see out of the back of your head, can you?"

Sam Adams came rushing from the hotel. His eyes went to the dead man.

"Anybody you know, Mr. Adams?" Hardie asked.

"No," the hotel man said, quickly. Then: "Why should he be?"

"Don't you usually get a look at the people who check in at your hotel?"

"He wasn't checked in!" declared Adams, positively.

"Some cheap hired gun," the sheriff said. "But the trouble is, I have a feeling this won't stop with him."

"I've got the same feeling," Hardie said.

Shortly before noon the next day, the two guards outside the sheriff's office were talking quietly about their adventures during the war. Suddenly one of them stiffened.

"It can't be!" he said, in a tone of awe.

The other guard followed the eyes of the first one. He saw a rider coming down the street, a man wearing two guns and dressed in black trousers, black shirt and a black, flat-crowned Stetson.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"John Wesley Hardin," said the first guard.

The second guard whistled softly. The sheriff, coming out of his office, looked toward the rider, who was approaching the jail building.

"Hardin?" the sheriff said to the guard who had recognized the approaching man. "How do you know it's Hardin?"

"Saw him two years ago. Don't forget a man like him."

The three men watched Hardin ride by and stop in front of the hotel. The second guard said, then: "Isn't there a 'Wanted' on him?"

"None I know of," said the sheriff.

"But from what I've heard, he's—"

"Killed more men in cold blood than Billy the Kid and Jesse James put together. But they were shoot-outs. Standup gunfights. Hardin's no outlaw. Never robbed anybody in his life."

"Wonder what he's doing here?" the first guard asked.

"I can guess," the sheriff said, his forehead creasing in a frown. "But I hope I'm wrong. . . ."

He exhaled heavily and started for the hotel.

Jim Hardie was stripped to the waist and standing in front of the cracked mirror that hung over the washstand. He was shaving with a keenly honed razor. There was a discreet knock at the door.

"Come in," Hardie called.

The door opened and the sheriff entered. He closed the door and sat down on the bed. "John Wesley Hardin just rode into town," he said, after a moment.

Hardie finished shaving under his chin. "Can't say I'm too surprised."

The sheriff shook his head. "They say he's killed thirty-five men."

"Not counting Indians," Hardie said, drily. "He always says that."

"Don't underestimate him, Jim," the sheriff warned. "He's a killer. Some people say he's out of his mind."

Hardie nodded. "I've heard that he wakes up screaming, out of a dead sleep."

He picked up a towel and began to wipe the lather from his face.

The sheriff said, gloomily, "Trick shot artist, carries guns concealed all over him. In his sleeve, waist, you never know where it's coming from. With him, everything is tricks."

Hardie tossed aside his towel and reached for his shirt. "What are you trying to tell me, Ed?"

"I think somebody sent for him."

Hardie nodded. "My idea, too. He must cost plenty."

The sheriff said, bitterly, "I can run him out of town."

"You mean, you could try."

"You don't give me much credit, Jim. I've got a lot of respect for you. I think you know that. And I've never made a proposition like this to anybody in my life. Suppose Wells Fargo was to suddenly send you away on some other business? I hold Lambert over until next court day, when things will have calmed down."

"Now, you're not giving me much credit," said Hardie.

The sheriff sighed and got to his feet. "Didn't think you'd go for it, but I had to try."

A short while later the sheriff, back in his office, looked through the window and saw John Wesley Hardin approaching the jail. He got to his feet and stepped out on the veranda.

Hardin came up and looked pointedly at the two guards. "What's all the arsenal for?"

"Court day tomorrow, Mr. Hardin," said the sheriff. "We're guarding a prisoner."

"He must be sort of special."

"He is." The sheriff paused. "There's been talk somebody might try to break him out. We don't figure to let that happen."

"Maybe you're guarding the wrong man, sheriff," said the famous gunfighter, mockingly. "Ever think of that?"

"Who do you think we should be watching?"

Hardin shrugged. "A witness, maybe."

"Who?"

"He works for Wells Fargo."

"You got a grudge against him?"

John Wesley Hardin shrugged blandly. "I don't even know him." He grinned insolently at the sheriff and, turning, walked back up the street. A youngster, in the middle of the street, stopped in his tracks and stared at Hardin, as if fascinated by what he saw.

Two townsmen gawked at Hardin, then fell in beside him and walking along, engaged Hardin in conversation. By the time Hardin turned into the saloon, next door to the hotel, the two townsmen thought they were old friends of Hardin's.

The bartender had never seen John Wesley Hardin in his life, but he had ears and he had heard the swift rumor that

had run about town. When Hardin stepped up to the bar, he said:

"This is on the house, Mr. Hardin."

Hardin chuckled wickedly. "It seems I acquired some friends on the way in. The drinks free for them, too?"

"For any friends of yours," said the bartender, swallowing hard.

"Thank you, Mr. Hardin," said the first townsman, Stone, by name.

"Appreciate it," said the second, who was called Newton.

"Isn't costing me anything," Hardin said, easily.

The drinks were poured out and the men picked up glasses.

"Your health, Mr. Hardin," said Newton.

The three men drank, then Newton cleared his throat. "Mr. Hardin, wonder if you'd indulge us with a small favor."

"Up to a point, maybe."

Newton cleared his throat again, coughed and swallowed with difficulty. "We've heard about your gun tricks, Mr. Hardin. Guess everybody's heard about them. I, uh, we wonder, that is, you wouldn't be of a mind, to, uh, show us some of them?"

"Newton," exclaimed the bartender. "Let's not pester Mr. Hardin."

John Wesley Hardin smiled indulgently. "He's not pestering. Man is good at something, he doesn't mind showing folks."

Sam Adams came into the bar and stopped at the edge of the bar, his eyes on Hardin. John Wesley Hardin stepped back from the bar and raised his hands to shoulder level. "Suppose a man gets the drop on you, an outlaw, maybe. He comes over to get your hip gun." He nodded to Newton. "Try it."

Newton suddenly began to perspire and was reluctant to move forward.

"Go on, reach for it," urged Hardin.

Newton reached for Hardin's hip gun. Hardin dipped one hand into his coat pocket, whipped out a gun and jammed it into Newton's throat before the townsman could bring out Hardin's holster gun.

Newton reeled back. In a flash Hardin dropped the short pocket gun back into his pocket, crossed his hand across his chest and brought a gun out from under his coat. He flicked back the coat with his free hand.

"Shoulder holster," he said, modestly. "My own invention."

"You ever kill a man that way?" cried Stone.

"Three or four," shrugged Hardin.

"How about sleeve guns?" asked the bartender.

"Only wear 'em in poker games."

"Do you—do you have any other tricks?" asked Stone.

"Some," replied Hardin, "but you've seen all I'm going to show you."

Stone showed disappointment. "I heard a story that you once got the drop on Wild Bill Hickok, even though he had the drop on you first."

Hardie entered the saloon. He stopped just inside the door. The bartender saw him, then said to Stone, "Mr. Hardin just said, you've seen all you're going to see."

John Wesley Hardin had caught a glimpse of Jim Hardie, but avoided looking at him, directly. He smiled at his admirer, Stone.

"I'll show you the Hickok trick." He squared away before Stone. "Point your finger at me, like it was a gun."

Stone simulated a gun pointing at him.

"All right," said Hardin, "you've told me to hand over my guns . . . butt first."

He drew his guns with both hands, reversed them and extended the butts. Stone started to reach for them. Both revolvers made quick flips and smacked into Hardin's hands, the muzzles pointing at Stone.

"I call that the road agent's spin," said Hardin.

"You invent that, too?" asked Newton in awe.

"Yep," admitted Hardin. "It took the starch out of Wild Bill Hickok."

He holstered his revolvers, then turned deliberately to Jim Hardie. "I could be wrong, but if I was to take a guess, I'd say you're a Wells Fargo man."

Hardie came forward, nodding. "Some talk around town that you're here to keep me from testifying at the trial."

John Wesley Hardin cocked his head to one side. "You like testifying against people? When one man's word puts a rope around another man's neck, it's a pretty dirty business. I don't like people who do things like that."

"I don't like people who rob Wells Fargo and shoot our agents and drivers," said Hardie.

Jim Hardie was in his hotel room when he heard the banging of a revolver out on the street. He went to the window and looking out, saw a crowd of people gathered. In their midst was the redoubtable John Wesley Hardin, shooting at tin cans being thrown into the air.

Hardie stood for a moment, watching, then shaking his head, he left his room and went downstairs. The shooting was still going on when he reached the street and he strolled up to watch. Several people eyed him as he came along and made way for him, so that Hardie found himself on the inside of the ring.

Stone was just in the act of throwing three tin cans into the air, all at the same time. Hardin, with a gun in each hand, seemed to fire in one rippling motion. It was obvious from the way the cans leaped in their orbits, that he hit all three. A murmur of awe ran through the crowd.

"Try four cans this time," John Wesley Hardin told Stone.

His eyes fell upon Jim Hardie. "They tell me you're pretty good with a gun."

"I only shoot when I have to," replied Hardie.

"That's playing it close," said Hardin. He smirked. "I got twenty dollars says you can't hit two cans out of three."

Hardie shook his head.

"One out of three!" challenged John Wesley Hardin.

Mary Lambert said, suddenly, "Mr. Hardie prefers better odds. Like shooting men who have never held guns in their hands."

"Your brother had a gun in his hand and he was shooting when I arrested him," Hardie said, quietly.

"I heard different," sneered John Wesley Hardin.

Sheriff Tige bustled forward. "I think we've seen enough shooting for today. You're good, Mr. Hardin, as good as I heard you were."

Hardin gave Hardie a mocking grin, then signaled to Stone. "Throw up the four cans." He dropped his left-hand gun into his holster.

Stone watched Hardin and when the latter nodded he threw up the four cans, two from each hand. Hardin's gun went up and he fired twice, then with scarcely a break in the firing he tossed the gun from his right hand to his left and fired twice more.

All four cans were hit.

A roar went up in the crowd. John Wesley Hardin, reloading his revolvers, gave Hardie a final smirk and went off in the direction of the saloon.

Mary Lambert said to Jim Hardie, "People are saying that man is here to kill you. He'll do it, too. He's the most dangerous man in the country."

"He may be all of that," Hardie conceded, soberly.

Mary said, warmly, "Now, you know how it feels to be facing death. The way my brother is. Except it isn't quite as certain for you. You can still run. He can't."

"Your brother can tell what he knows," Sheriff Tige said.

"He's doing himself no good by refusing to talk," Hardie added.

"Talk? And lose his last hope?" cried Mary Lambert.

"He'll lose that hope tomorrow in the courtroom," the sheriff said.

"I don't think so," said Mary, stubbornly. "Do you, Mr. Hardie? They say your testimony can convict him. But one way or another, I don't think you'll be in court tomorrow."

"I don't think you really mean that," Hardie said, bleakly.

She stared at him, then biting her lip, turned and walked quickly away.

The sheriff said: "You haven't changed your mind? About taking that trip?"

Hardie looked toward the saloon. "A lot of people are worrying about that . . . John Wesley Hardin . . . Sam Adams. . . ."

"Sam Adams!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Why should he worry?"

"He's been quite interested in me—and John Wesley Hardin."

"Adams," the sheriff repeated. "He's the last man in this town I would suspect of. . . ."

"He owns a piece of the bank," said Hardie. "He knows about our gold shipments, exactly what stage they'll be on, where the money is. He's the one man in this town who could be of great help to stagecoach robbers."

The sheriff rubbed his chin dubiously. "It's going to be a hard thing to prove anything against a man like Adams, unless—unless Henry Lambert talks."

"Add it up," Hardie went on. "Lambert believes firmly that he's going to be saved. He's counting on it. Well, John Wesley Hardin's here—to save him. And what kind of a man can hire a John Wesley Hardin?" He paused. "A man like Adams. I think I'll have a talk with him."

"You're not going to accuse him?" asked the sheriff, in alarm.

"Not yet."

"Then why the talk?"

"Maybe I can start a rumor."

He nodded to the sheriff and went to the hotel. Sam Adams

was behind the desk as he came in. He smiled wanly at Hardie.

"That was quite an exhibition out there, wasn't it, Mr. Hardie?"

"It impressed me, which it was supposed to do, I guess."

"I hear he's unbeatable," said Adams, warmly. "They say if he can't outdraw or outshoot a man, he just plain out-thinks him."

"Could I talk to you about something else?" asked Hardie. "I understand you handle land deals."

"Yes, of course."

"I've been thinking seriously of acquiring some property around here. A small ranch."

Adams' mouth fell open and it was all he could do to close it. "You—you want to buy land?"

"Like to see what's available. How about after the trial tomorrow?"

"But people are saying that. . . ." Adams caught himself, gulped hard.

Hardie laughed. "People are saying I'll be a dead man by tomorrow night? I didn't think you'd believe that."

Adams swallowed with difficulty. "Well, I—I don't, but. . . ."

"Let's get back to the land subject. Will you be able to take me out tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes," said Adams, shaken. "Yes, I'll be able to do that."

Hardie went to the stairs and climbed up to the second floor. He went to his room, took off his coat and sprawled himself on the bed.

Down in the lobby, Adams was toying with his accounts, when someone entered the lobby. He looked up and winced. The man coming toward him was John Wesley Hardin.

"You shouldn't come here!" he gasped.

"You haven't paid me yet," said Hardin, serenely.

Adams sent a fearful look around. "I can't afford to be seen talking to you."

"Then stop talking and hand me the money. What the devil are you so nervous about?"

"The Wells Fargo man. He's talking about buying land."

"On Boot Hill?" asked Hardin, thinly.

"No—a ranch. That doesn't sound like a man who expects to die."

"Bragging talk, that's all."

"I'm not so sure."

Hardin held out his hand. "I never kill a man until I'm paid."

Adams sent another look about, then reached into his breast pocket and brought out a fat manila envelope. "Two thousand dollars," he said.

Hardin took the envelope, grinned and walked out of the hotel.

It was mid-afternoon when Jim Hardie entered the blacksmith shop across from the hotel. He showed the smith a sheet of paper. "How long'll it take you to make this?"

The smith studied it a moment. "I'm not too busy now. Can have it for you, by tomorrow."

Hardie shook his head. "Two hours. It's important. Very important."

The smith hesitated. "I'll drop everything else."

"I'd appreciate it if you would. My life may depend on it."

He turned away from the blacksmith. Outside, John Wesley Hardin was coming along. The gunfighter grinned wickedly when he saw him.

"Been hearing some things about you, Wells Fargo," Hardin said.

"Hope some of it's good," Hardie said, carelessly.

"It isn't. It's bad, all bad." His washed-out blue eyes seemed to bore into Hardie's. "You fixing to buy yourself some land?"

"Who told you that?"

"It's all over town."

"Maybe so, but I only told one man."

"You callin' me a liar?" demanded Hardin, belligerently.

Beyond Hardin, a group of spectators was assembling.

"No, I'm not," said Hardie, quietly.

"I said you did," snarled John Wesley Hardin. "Reach for your gun, mister."

"No," said Hardie.

"Reach!" cried Hardin.

"You want to kill me," said Hardie, tonelessly. "Go ahead, but I'm not drawing."

"You're yellow."

"Hardin," said Hardie. "You can't make me draw."

"Yellow!" screamed the gunfighter.

"Why don't you shoot?" asked Hardie, tonelessly.

Sweat had come out on John Wesley Hardin's face. He said, "Mister, I can't afford to shoot a man who doesn't draw first. At least, not without a warning. So, I'm giving you fair warning, right now, in front of witnesses. You be out of this

town by sunset or I'm going to kill you, whether you crawl or cry. Is that clear? Good and clear?"

"I heard you."

"I mean it. You get out of this town!"

Hardin whirled and strode away, spectators leaping aside to give him passage. Hardie remained in front of the blacksmith shop. Slowly the crowd began to melt away from before him, until only Mary Lambert remained.

"How could you?" she cried. "How could you endure *that*?"

"I imagine you enjoyed it even more than the shooting awhile ago."

"No," she said, miserably. "I didn't enjoy it at all. Mr. Hardie, I'm sorry for the things I said to you. I've been so upset about my brother that I—I just haven't seen things clearly before."

"What do you see clearly now?"

"What it is you're going through. Just for a job. Justice. A few words of truth to be spoken in a courtroom. For this—for this you've been willing to risk your life."

"I still am," said Hardie.

"No. No, you have to leave now."

"Your brother'd like that."

"I mean, for your sake, Mr. Hardie. He—he'll kill you. Go away. It's no disgrace. You've stood up to it as long as you can. Every man has a breaking point." She came toward him, pleading. "Please, I don't want to be saying these things over your grave."

The sun was dipping below the buildings on the west side of the street, when Jim Hardie entered the sheriff's office.

"Adams is the man," he said, to Sheriff Tige.

"You've got the proof?"

"No," said Hardie, "but I think I can flush him out. It'll take your co-operation. I want you to bring him out from back there, sit him down here by the window and talk to him."

"Make a target of him?"

"I don't think there'll be any danger to him. Not with your deputies out in front. Oh—have the deputies tell whoever stops that Lambert lost his nerve. That he's spilling his guts."

A worried crease came over the features of the sheriff. "I don't like it, Jim."

"Neither do I. But I don't like to be killed either."

"That's the reason I'm going to do it."

"Thanks, Ed. I figured you would."

The sheriff gave him a wan smile.

Hardie walked to the hotel and stood on the veranda. The shadows were almost reaching the far side of the street. He looked at his watch. It was not yet two hours. But he drew a deep breath and crossed to the blacksmith shop.

The blacksmith dipped a piece of metal into his water tub. He held it in the water and nodded. "Just about finished."

"Good," said Hardie.

He drew his revolver from the holster and stuck it under the waistband of his trousers. Then he unbuckled his belt and handed it to the blacksmith. "You know how it's to go on here?"

"I think I've got it figured out."

The smith took the metal out of the water and carried it, with the holster, to his anvil. He bent over it a moment, then took a hammer and banged lightly a few times. He did a little more work, then held up the cartridge belt to Hardie.

"I'm not going to test it," said Hardie. "It's going to work—or it isn't. How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," said the smith. "If it doesn't work, I'm going to feel pretty bad about it. If it does work . . . knowing I helped will be worth more than any money you could pay me."

"Thanks," said Hardie. "And that means more than just a word."

He buckled the belt about him again, tied down the bottom of the holster about his thigh and dropped his revolver into the holster. Then, drawing a deep breath, he left the blacksmith shop.

A rig stood in front of the hotel and as Hardie crossed to it, Sam Adams came out of the hotel. He was carrying a valise. When he saw Hardie, he came to an abrupt stop.

"What—what do you want?"

"You tell me," said Hardie.

"I'm going on a—a little trip. I don't see it's any business of yours."

"I think it is," said Hardie. "I also think it's the sheriff's business. Shall we go and have a talk with him?"

Adams took a step toward the buggy, then suddenly dropped the valise and whipped out a gun. He was too slow. Hardie's gun leaped into his hand, roared. Adams spun completely around and pitched to the ground.

Hardie holstered his revolver. His eyes went to the saloon next door to the hotel. It was only a moment or two before the batwing doors swung outwards and John Wesley Hardin came out. His eyes took in the body of Sam Adams, came to meet Hardie's.

"It's just about sundown," said Hardin, loudly. People were coming out of stores, but keeping well back on both sides of the line of fire. "I gave you fair warning."

"The man who paid you to kill me is dead, Hardin," Hardie said, evenly. "That lets you out of your contract. Now, you don't have to kill me."

"Suppose I want to kill you?" sneered Hardin. "For myself. Suppose it's a personal matter, now—between you and me?"

"You go ahead, then."

John Wesley Hardin stepped down into the street, less than twenty feet from Jim Hardie. He sent a quick look around, then faced Hardie. A thin sneer came to his lips.

Then he moved.

He was fast, horribly fast. His hand snaked down, gripped the butt of his revolver and came up.

But Jim Hardie's hand merely went down, struck the butt of his revolver and swiveled up the holster. His gun went off, still in the holster, shooting from the bottom of the holster as it swiveled up. The difference in shooting from that position gave him the split-second edge over the fastest gunfighter in the country—John Wesley Hardin.

The bullet went true, smashing John Wesley Hardin's gun from his hand. A trickle of blood seeped down Hardin's hand, but he seemed unaware of it. His eyes were bulging as he stared at Jim Hardie.

"You didn't draw," he said. "It—it was a trick!"

"Yes," said Hardie, coldly. "A trick. Want to see how it works?" He let the holster swing back to its normal position, then struck down on it, bringing it up again. "Swivel holster. All you have to do is swivel up and shoot through the bottom of the holster. Saves the time it takes to draw." He added, thinly: "My own invention."

"A low, sneaking trick," cried John Wesley Hardin.

"So is the road agent's spin, your border shift, your shoulder holster. When you're going after a man who lives by tricks, you've got to beat him with a trick." Hardie drew a deep breath and found that he was trembling. "You've been licked, Hardin. You're through in this town."

Slowly, Hardin took a handkerchief from his pocket and twisted it about his gun hand. Then he nodded and, turning, walked off.

Sheriff Tige came toward Hardie. "Tomorrow's court day," he said, simply.

"A big day. Young Lambert'll get off with a prison term."

"Better than the rope."

"He'll have time to think things over. I've an idea he'll be a better man when he comes out. His sister. . . ."

A smile came over Hardie's features.

Doc Bell

THE TWO MEN in the gray prison denims floundered through the brush, scrambling, falling, sliding and plunging from brush clump to brush clump. The baying of hounds, closing in, kept them moving along, far past their endurance point.

One of the men, Doc Bell, was forty or more, a grizzled man, who had lived too hard and was long past his prime. Yet his endurance was greater now than Jim Hardie's, who was ten years younger and supposedly in better physical condition.

It was Hardie who panted. "They're gaining, Doc. We can't outrun those dogs."

"Maybe not," said Doc Bell, grimly. "But we can out-smart them."

He took a shaker of cayenne pepper from his pocket. He had pilfered it from the prison kitchen for just such an emergency. He stooped and sprinkled pepper generously into his tracks, reached over and sprinkled in Hardie's footprints. Then, to make certain, he scattered pepper on the ground over a radius of several feet.

"Man's advantage over beast, Jim," Doc Bell observed. "The ability to reason. When those dogs get a whiff of the pepper it'll spoil them for two days. Come on."

He turned and started off down the slope, with renewed vigor. Hardie, groaning, followed the older man. The brush grew heavier and for a moment was so thick that it almost stopped Doc Bell. He finally forced his way through a heavy clump and exclaimed, "The river, Jim! We made it."

Hardie made it to the river's edge, beside Doc Bell. They waded into the shallow water, walked downstream around a bend, then found a sand bar and walked quickly across to the far side, where they climbed out of the water.

"The race is not always to the swiftest," Doc Bell observed then, panting heavily.

"We need clothes," said Hardie, "and horses. They take money."

Doc Bell looked searchingly at Hardie. "You wouldn't be getting ideas, would you, Jim?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"A man is apt to distrust in others the things he feels in himself," said Doc Bell, sententiously. "There's a price of three thousand dollars on my head, and there's a little bit of larceny in everybody."

Jim Hardie smiled easily. "It wouldn't be worth it, Doc. Figure it out. I turn you in and then serve my ten years. That's only three hundred a year."

Doc Bell looked thoughtfully at Hardie for a long moment, then clapped him on the shoulder. "That's sound reasoning. I like that in you, Jim. No sentiment. Just reason."

A half hour later, the two escaped convicts broke through a fringe of brush and saw a chuck wagon, some fifty yards away. The tantalizing odor of frying meat assailed their nostrils.

"Manna from heaven," said Doc Bell.

"Just one man," said Hardie. "But he's got a gun and we haven't."

Doc Bell moved back into the brush. Hardie followed. Doc seated himself on the ground and took off a shoe and a sock. He began to fill the sock with sand. "A sock full of sand has certain anaesthetic value," he observed. He reached up and handed the sock to Hardie. "I've noticed a certain grace of movement in you that I don't possess."

"You also noticed the six-gun he's wearing," said Hardie, sarcastically.

Doc Bell got to his feet. "It's root hog or die."

Hardie nodded and again stepped out of the brush. The cook's back was turned to him and he advanced cautiously across the level ground. He was within two yards of the cook before the latter heard him. He started to turn, then, and Hardie leaped in. The sock in his hand crushed in the cook's hat and thudded on his skull. The cook fell sideways, missing the fire in front of him.

Hardie was examining the stunned man when Doc Bell padded up. "I hope he isn't hurt bad," Hardie said.

Doc Bell stooped over the unconscious man and examined the bruise on his head. He straightened. "He won't even have much of a bump." He looked at Hardie with new interest.

"You did that nicely. I deplore a needless waste of life. Spent too many years saving lives, I guess."

Hardie was already peeling off his prison garb.

A few minutes later, after a short rummaging through the chuck wagon both men were wearing new apparel and Doc Bell was feeding their old prison garments into the flames of the cookfire.

Hardie nodded approval. "It's real pleasurable to watch that phase of my life go up in flames."

"And like phoenix," said the ex-doctor, "a new man rises from the ashes."

"It'd be nice to think so, but it won't be that way."

"Don't tell me you've changed your mind, Jim. Back there in prison you used to say if you ever got out you'd go straight as a string."

"And I would, too," Hardie said. "If I had a nest egg."

"What do you call a nest egg?"

"Oh, I don't know. Enough to go to Mexico. Live it up some."

"I like Mexico," said Doc Bell, nodding thoughtfully. "I was a surgeon in the Army there, during the war."

"So you told me."

"You don't believe me?"

Hardie smiled thinly. "Hardly."

"A man like you, Jim, one who has never known respectability, you can't imagine the pull to return to it."

"I suppose not," said Hardie. "All I know is it takes money to live up to my appetite."

"How much money?"

"What's the use talking about it. There isn't a town in the country we can get into, much less get out of."

"What if I were to tell you that I know where there's a great deal of money?"

"Try me," grinned Hardie. "I might be interested."

"I'll do better than that. I'll show you."

Three days later, Doc Bell and Jim Hardie, unshaved, their clothing alkali-stained and travel-worn, rode tired horses up the last sharp slope of an incline and reached a small cove that seemed to have been gouged out of the mountain itself by a gigantic superhuman hand. At the far side of the semi-circle a weathered shack stood with its back wall against the sheer side of the cliff.

A man sitting on a bench against the wall, got to his feet, sprang to the door and called inside. Two men came pouring

out and three men lined up to watch Doc Bell and Hardie ride up and dismount.

A stocky brick-haired man who answered to the name of Brick, set the tone of the greeting. "Sure glad to see you again, Doc. When word got around that you was out, we was real pleased."

A tall curly-haired youngster with a mean look, indicated Jim Hardie. "Who's he?"

"His name's Jim Hollis," Doc Bell said. "He made the break with me."

"So?" sneered the curly-haired one.

Hardie grinned. "Your friends don't seem very glad to see me, Doc."

"It's greed, Jim," opined Doc Bell. "Pure greed. Look at them. That grin on Brick's face has a dollar sign on every tooth. The big one's Tibbs. But Curly here, he's the prize of the lot. Right now he's trying to figure how much he'll lose if you're dealt in."

"Cut the fancy talk, Doc," snarled Curly. "Is he in?"

"You're a good student of human nature," Hardie said to Bell.

"I pride myself on it."

"I asked a question, Doc," persisted Curly.

"Maybe I can answer it better than he can," Hardie said, hard and even. "Doc and I crawled halfway across this state together. If he says I'm in—I'm in."

"That answer your question, Curly?" Doc Bell asked.

Curly's lips curled back into a snarl. "If a man's going to ride with us on a job we've got a right to know what he's like."

"That's reasonable," admitted Bell. "What do you want to know?"

"Doc," said Curly, earnestly. "You're smarter than I am and I know it. But he isn't . . . and I don't see why we should split with him."

"I do. Isn't that enough?"

"If you say so, Doc," Brick said, quickly.

"No, it's not enough," Curly said, doggedly.

Doc Bell turned to Hardie. "There seems to be some doubt in Curly's mind as to your usefulness."

Hardie nodded to Curly. "You're a fast draw, I hear. Go ahead and draw."

"You do, Curly and we'll be short a man." Doc made a smooth movement and a Frontier Model appeared in his hand.

"Put it away, Doc," said Hardie. "I don't need help."

"Maybe not, but I need you . . . and I'm still running things. That right, Curly?"

Curly waited a long moment before replying. Then he said, "Yeah, that's right, Doc."

The little cabin was well stocked with food and the bandits were prepared for almost any eventuality—except boredom. There was nothing for them to do. They slept, they ate and they played cards and wrangled with one another. Tempers became testy.

Doc Bell was their leader. His words and actions could not be questioned. When he saddled his horse every morning and rode down the steep trail not to reappear again until late afternoon and sometimes even after darkness had fallen no one dared to question him. Jim Hardie noticed that the former doctor carried a pair of high-powered binoculars with him and assumed that he was not taking the glasses merely to watch jackrabbits from a distance.

Something was in the wind, Hardie knew that. What it was, he had not the slightest idea.

After several days in the outlaw hideout, Hardie watched Doc Bell leave one morning and, turning, observed that Curly was in turn watching him. He shook his head.

"For a man who likes to talk," Hardie said, "Doc sure can keep things to himself. Wonder what he's got up his sleeve?"

"He'll tell you when he wants you to know."

"I suppose so. Hope it's as big as that Marysville job."

Curly cocked his head to one side. "What about Marysville?"

"Well, Doc was doin' the time for it. You fellows must've cut up quite a hand."

"Matter of fact," scowled Brick, coming up in time to hear, "we ain't seen any of that money yet. Doc stashed it."

Hardie grinned. "He's smarter than I thought he was. You grind the corn and he gets the mash."

It was the following morning when Doc Bell finally assembled the members of the gang about him, in front of the cabin. Getting down on both knees he spread out a large sheet of paper. "Here's the layout," he said, "and this is what each of us will do."

He proceeded to elaborate on the plan and Hardie, studying the plan and listening to the doctor, found that his estimation of the bandit leader was all too meager. Doc Bell had not only figured out every contingency that could arise, but had worked out the solution.

He spent two hours discussing the plan, then answered

questions for another hour and later in the day, called the men together again and once more went over the thing, in detail.

The whoo-hoo of the train whistle was the signal for Doc Bell, Hardie and the others to ride their horses out of the patch of woods, onto the railroad right of way. Then, as the engineer began to apply the brakes when he saw the log barrier on the tracks, the train robbers put spurs to their horses and galloped down both sides of the right of way. They discharged their revolvers, yelled and made as much noise as possible. Before the train had come to a full stop, Brick was in the cab, threatening the engineer and fireman.

Tibbs and Curly caught up the log laid conveniently close to the rails and were ready to rush the log end at the door of the express car. Only Hardie held back and Doc, standing to one side, snapped at him: "What are you waiting for, Jim? Give Curly and Tibbs a hand."

Hardie trotted up to the battering ram and grabbing hold with both hands, fell into step with the other bandits. They rushed at the door of the express car.

Inside the express car a rifle banged. A splinter was torn from the log, inches from Hardie's hands. He promptly let go of the log.

Tibbs dropped his end and Curly, swearing furiously, let go of his own end. The three men took cover along the side of the embankment and began firing with their revolvers at the express car.

Behind them Doc Bell roared: "Hold your fire, men!"

Crouched, he came up to the embankment. "Give me your shirt, Jim," he snapped. "You, too, Curly. . . ."

Without question, Hardie peeled off his shirt. Curly sullenly tore off his own shirt. Doc grabbed the two shirts and, bent low, ran forward to the engine cab. He boarded it, grabbed down a signal lantern and unscrewing the fuel cap poured coal oil onto the shirts.

Carrying the oil-soaked shirts he climbed onto the coal car and negotiated his way along the top, to the express car. Ducking under the end window, he reached up and with the butt of his revolver smashed in the glass. Then, striking a match and applying it to the oil-soaked shirts he threw the flaming mess through the express-car window.

Smoke began to pour out of the window. Doc Bell grinned, moved to the side of the car, then dropping down to the right

of way made a short run to the embankment behind which Hardie and the others were still crouched.

"They ain't gonna open that door," Brick said, pessimistically.

"He's right, Doc," said Hardie. "Let's forget this one. There'll be a posse from town in no time."

"Go ahead, get out," snapped Doc Bell. "All of you. I'm staying. There's a hundred thousand in that car."

The bandits hesitated. The firing inside the express car had stopped. Smoke was pouring through the windows broken by the gunfire of the bandits. "You goin'?" Doc asked, nastily.

Before any of the others could reply the door of the express car started to open. A Wells Fargo guard dropped to the ground. His eyes were streaming.

"It worked!" screamed Curly.

"Of course it worked," Doc said, calmly. "All right, Curly, you and Tibbs. Get in and haul out the box."

Tibbs and Curly clambered to their feet and rushed to the express car. Tibbs reached it first. He started to climb up. A shot inside the car rang out and Tibbs fell back to the ground.

Curly yelped, thrust his gun into the car and fired twice. He stopped, peered inside, then fired again.

"Two men in the express car," winced Doc Bell. "One thing I hadn't counted on."

Tibbs made it to the outlaws' hideout, but he lost much blood on the way and was pale and only semiconscious when his companions deposited him on his bunk in the cabin.

Doc Bell bent over the wounded man. He tore away his shirt and studied the wound. "No bones broken, but he's lost a lot of blood."

He looked at a shelf across the room, where a medical bag was shrouded in dust. Drawing a deep breath, Doc crossed the room and took down the bag.

Hardie, alarmed, stepped forward. "Now, wait a minute, Doc. This is no job for an amateur."

"We'll see who's an amateur," Doc Bell replied, crookedly.

Hardie moved back to the wounded Tibbs. "Nobody knows me in town. It'd be better to take you to a real doctor."

Tibbs stared at him mutely.

"If gangrene sets in, you'll lose that arm," Hardie went on. "Maybe your life."

Doc Bell came up. Tibbs's eyes met his. "Perhaps you'd

better do like he says, Doc," Tibbs said, weakly. "Let him take me to the edge of town and dump me. I'll make it to a doctor."

"You still don't believe I was a real doctor," Bell said to Hardie. "During the war, I handled as many as fifty gun wounds like this in a single day." He turned to the other outlaws. "Curly, Brick, come over here and hold him down."

Hardie moved back and the other outlaws came forward. They gripped Tibbs tightly, but Brick, Hardie noticed, turned away his head. Doc Bell noted it. "Brick's squeamish, Jim. How about helping?"

Hardie saw there was nothing to do but fall in. He moved forward and Brick gladly stepped aside.

Doc Bell opened his bag and brought out a forceps and scalpel. With swift, sure movements he probed for the bullet, cut a little with the knife, then reaching in again with the forceps, brought it out.

A smile of triumph was on his face as he exhibited the bullet gripped by the tongs of the forceps.

"Who's an amateur?" he asked.

Hardie nodded. "You're a real pro, Doc."

It was later, when the patient, bandaged and under sedation, was sleeping that the loot of the train holdup was sorted out on the table in the cabin. There were five large stacks of bills.

"Twenty thousand apiece," Doc Bell announced. He looked at Jim Hardie and sighed. "Seems a shame, in a way."

"How do you mean?" asked Hardie.

"Well, this money represents a month's wages for all the miners who work by the sweat of their bodies. Curly, here, will spend his trying to make eight the hard way. Tibbs—he's got a weakness for women."

"I'm not spreading my share around," Hardie said.

"Listen to him, boys," said Doc Bell. "Jim reasons things out."

"This money'll be hotter than the mill tails of Hades," Hardie went on.

Curly grabbed up his stack of bills. "I'll spend mine while I'm young enough to enjoy it."

"You might not get a chance," Hardie said, pointedly.

"I'll sure try," declared Curly.

Hardie shook his head. "Wells Fargo's got the serial numbers of every one of those bills. They're just hoping we'll start spending it."

"You seem to know a lot about it," Curly said, sullenly.

"It's not the first Wells Fargo job I've pulled," Hardie said, evenly. "How do you think I wound up in jail."

"Suppose you worry about you," snapped Curly. "I'll take care of myself."

"The love of money is the root of all evil," Doc Bell quoted.

"I never knew you to have any objections to it," Curly snarled. "Your fancy talk don't go down anymore, Doc."

"Pearls before swine, Jim," Doc Bell quoted again.

Hardie smiled tightly. "I've got a real respect for Wells Fargo detectives."

Doc started to turn away, but Curly put up a detaining hand. "We ain't finished, Doc."

Doc Bell gave the young outlaw a cool glance. "As far as I'm concerned we are."

Curly looked at Brick. What he saw in the other man's face, apparently reassured him. "I mean the money we got comin' from the Marysville job."

"Maybe you was figurin' on runnin' out on us, huh, Doc?" Brick said, cheerfully.

Hardie said: "You listen to Curly, Brick, and you'll wind up in jail. You know what that's like? They put you in a cell that's ten feet long and six feet wide. I've seen men bang their heads against the wall. Big men, just like you."

"You stay out of this," Curly said nastily to Hardie. "What you do with your cut on the last deal is your business. We're talkin' about something else."

Doc Bell smiled placatingly at the angry Curly. "Don't you think it would be better if I kept the money for you? You'll spend this pile and need more in a little while."

"I want it now!" said Curly.

Doc Bell heaved a long sigh of resignation. "All right. But it's not here, you know."

"I know that," said Curly. "We darn' near tore the place down lookin'."

"While you was away," Brick added.

Hardie smiled at Doc Bell. "Looks like they don't trust you, Doc."

"It has to be hid somewhere close by," Curly went on. "They caught you at the foot of the mountain."

"I'll have to go to town to get it," Doc Bell finally said.

"You hid it in town?" cried Brick.

"The obvious is sometimes the most advantageous. Right, Jim?"

"Leave me out of this one, Doc. I've got all that's coming to me, right here. I had no part in the Marysville holdup."

Two hours later Tibbs awakened from his drugged sleep and declared himself ready for anything. Doc Bell tried to tell him that he should take it easy for a couple of days, but Tibbs, when he learned that Doc was going for the Marysville money, insisted on getting up and going with the others.

As a result, the five men rode down the mountain trail. Reaching the valley below, Jim Hardie pulled up his horse. Doc Bell rode up to him and held out his hand.

"Good-by, Jim."

Hardie smiled ruefully. "Just 'so long,' Doc. I've got a feeling we'll all meet together real soon."

"I hope not," chuckled Doc Bell.

Hardie waved to the other members of the gang, then headed his horse across the valley, to the west.

He passed over a low knoll, rode into woods and then abruptly turned his mount eastward.

It was dusk when he rode into Marysville. He turned off at the first cross street and there dismounted and tied his horse to a hitchrail. He moved off into the shadow of a building and settled down for a wait.

At the other end of town, Doc Bell turned to Curly, the wounded Tibbs, and Brick. "From here, I go in alone."

"All right, Doc," Curly said, after a pause, "but don't try anything fancy. There won't be a rock big enough to hide under if you do."

Doc gave Curly a thin smile and, turning his horse, rode up the dark street at an easy canter. He continued down the street, out of sight of the gang, past the Wells Fargo office and on to the far end of Marysville.

He scarcely looked to the right or left as he rode and he never once stopped.

He was clearing the last building on the street, when he became aware of hoofbeats behind him. He swiveled in the saddle and made out a single horse coming after him.

He did not pull up his horse, did not put it into a gallop. Jim Hardie rode up beside him.

"Goin' some place, Doc?" Hardie asked, carelessly. His revolver was in his fist.

Doc Bell shook his head. "You disappoint me, Jim. I hardly expected you to rob a friend."

"What do you call what you're doing?"

"I told you before, Curly, Brick and Tibbs were acquaintances. Not friends. Now, I'm going to disappoint you. I haven't got the Marysville money."

"What gave you the notion I was interested in that?" Hardie asked.

"Then why are you here?"

"You're a smart man, Doc," Hardie said. "I'm not exactly stupid, myself. I thought with the others out of the way we'd make a good team."

"With you cutting in on the Marysville money?"

"Nope. I only want what we earn together. You and I could go a long way."

"You mean that? You don't want any of the Marysville money?"

Hardie put away his revolver.

"Then let's go get it," said Doc Bell, putting spurs to his horse.

Hardie was not too surprised when he found himself climbing the steep trail that led to the hideout. Doc Bell looked over his shoulder once or twice and when they reached the cabin and dismounted he said to Hardie:

"Remember what I said? That the most obvious is the most advantageous."

He walked up to the door, but instead of entering, grabbed the single step doorstoop. He heaved back, moving the stoop forward a foot. A black metal box was revealed.

"They've been walking over this for six months," Doc said.

From the shelter of some rocks fifty yards away, came a blast of gunfire. It was hastily fired, in rage, and Doc Bell and Jim Hardie were able to throw themselves flat on the ground, without being hit.

From there Doc returned the fire, then suddenly rose and, crouching, ran for the shelter of a huge rock. From behind it he peppered the rocks concealing the other outlaws and Jim Hardie was able to make it to the protection of the rock that shielded Doc Bell.

There was a moment of quiet and during it, Curly's voice yelled: "No deals this time, Doc. It's gonna be you and the money."

"Stay with me all the way, Jim," Doc said to Hardie, "and we split down the middle."

To the other outlaws he replied: "Go to hell!"

Curly's voice rose once more: "We've got no quarrel with you, Jim. Get on your horse and go."

Hardie said to Bell: "There's just a chance I can outsmart them."

"Go ahead, Jim!"

Hardie rose up to a standing crouch. "Curly," he yelled. "You mean it?"

"Like I said," Curly's voice replied. "Go ahead."

"You've already got Doc," Hardie said, "and I sure don't fit into this argument."

He started out from the rocks, moved toward the cabin, where his horse stood patiently. Curly rose up from behind the rocks that had concealed him. He started into the open, then Brick and Tibbs showed.

Hardie, watching closely, saw the wicked grin that came over Curly's face. He waited until the outlaw's gun began to swing toward him, then he whipped up his own gun and fired.

Curly's gun went off, a fraction of a second after Hardie's bullet struck him. It was that close. Before he hit the ground, Doc Bell was up, firing at Tibbs and Brick. In a moment it was over and Doc Bell came toward Hardie.

"That split still goes, Jim," he said, holstering his gun.

Hardie's gun covered Bell. "I'm afraid I've got to take it all."

Vast disappointment came over Doc Bell's features. "I knew I couldn't trust this scum, Jim, but you—I prided myself on my judgment of you. I thought you were honest."

"You were right, Doc," Hardie said heavily. "The only thing I lied about to you, was—my name. It's Jim Hardie. I also didn't tell you that I work for Wells Fargo and that I had myself put into prison to . . . well, to do what I did."

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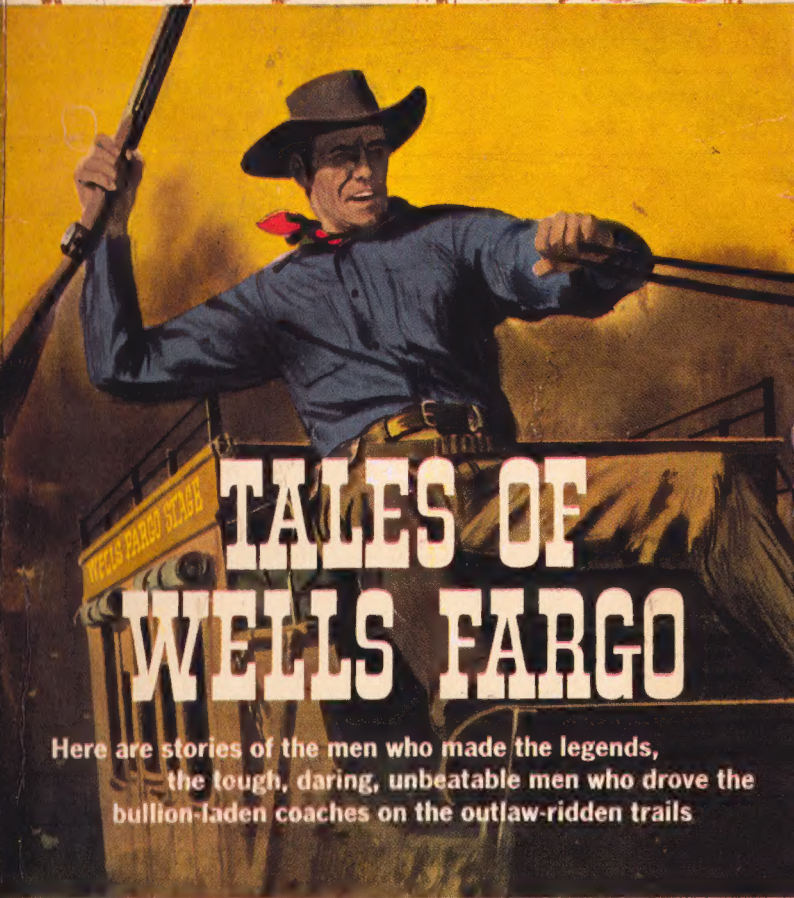
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